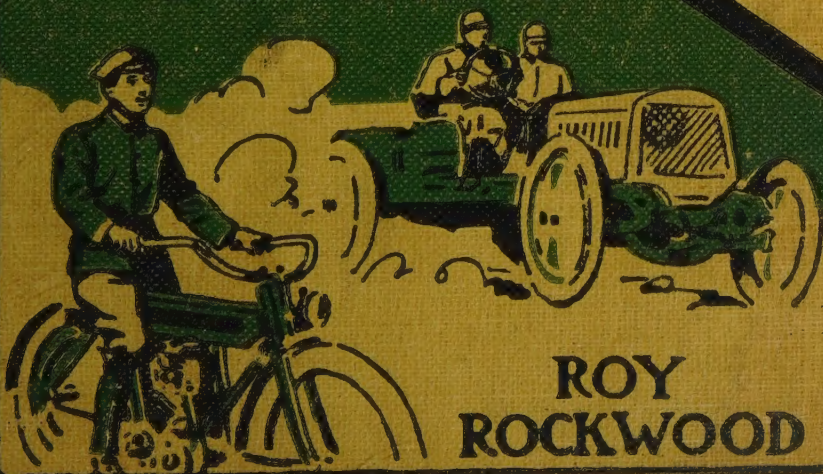




THE SPEEDWELL BOYS

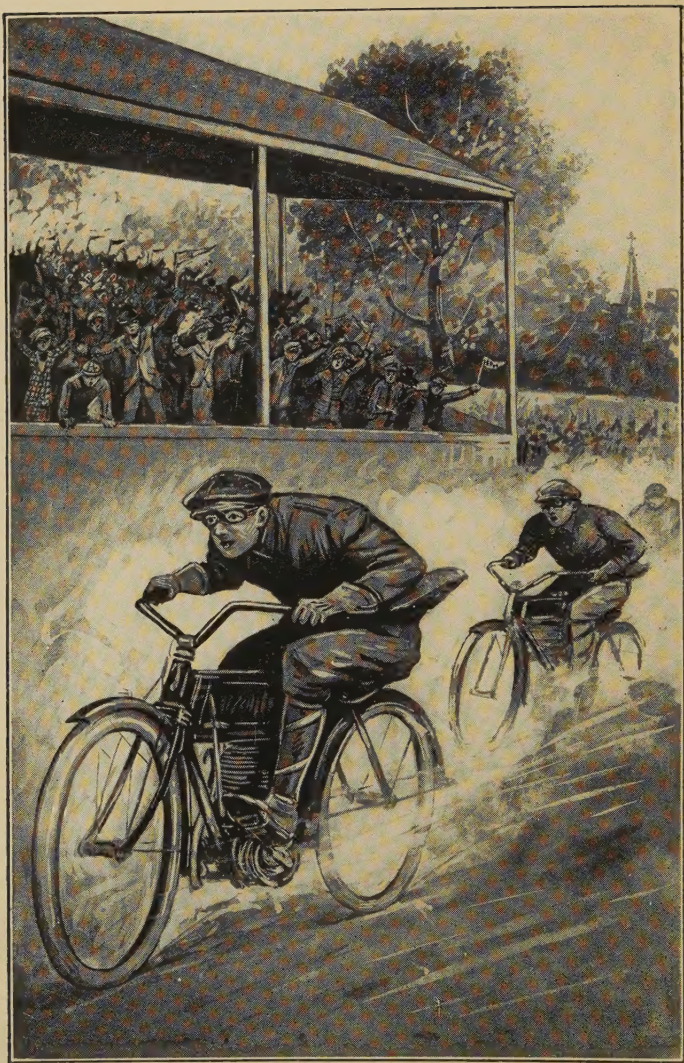
ON
MOTOR
CYCLES



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CHANCE AVERY HAD TO CONTENT HIMSELF TO TAG IN,
A BAD SECOND.

The Speedwell Boys on Motorcycles

Or

The Mystery of a Great Conflagration

BY

ROY ROCKWOOD

AUTHOR OF "THE SPEEDWELL BOYS AND THEIR RACING AUTO,"
"THE DAVE DASHAWAY SERIES," "THE GREAT
MARVEL SERIES," ETC.

ILLUSTRATED

NEW YORK
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THE SPEEDWELL BOYS ON MOTORCYCLES

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CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I. THE MAN WITH THE RAT TRAP	1
II. THE OLD CATCH BASIN	12
III. "FIRE!"	22
IV. THROUGH FLAME AND SMOKE	29
V. BILLY TAKES A HAND	36
VI. FINE TEAM WORK	43
VII. AFTER THE FIRE	50
VIII. THE BARNEGAT RUN	57
IX. THE MAN IN THE FLAG SHANTY	63
X. THE EMPTY CLOCK CASE	70
XI. THEIR DEAREST WISH	79
XII. DAN AND BILLY DECIDE	90
XIII. CHANCE AVERY IS CHECKMATED	102
XIV. THE BADGERS	111
XV. AN EXPERIMENT	117
XVI. FIGHTING TO WIN	129
XVII. DOING HIS VERY BEST	135
XVIII. BILLY AND RICK BADGER	143
XIX. THE JAUNT TO KARNAC LAKE	148
XX. DAN TO THE RESCUE	157

CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
XXI. LOST IN THE SWAMP . . .	164
XXII. BILLY TO THE RESCUE . . .	172
XXIII. THE SHUTTLE OF SUSPICION . .	178
XXIV. THE MYSTERY EXPLAINED . .	192
XXV. THE DAY OF THE RACE . . .	202

THE SPEEDWELL BOYS ON MOTORCYCLES

CHAPTER I

THE MAN WITH THE RAT TRAP

"WHICH road did they take, Dan?"

"Why, the pike, I suppose."

"We'll never catch up to them," complained the younger lad, impatiently, pedaling furiously over the country road between Riverdale and Upton Falls.

"'Never' is a long lane, Billy," laughed his brother.

"If we had motorcycles like Chanceford Avery, we'd get to the Falls all right," puffed Billy.

"That is what put them all so far ahead of us," responded his brother. "Chance is pacing them on his motor. Some of the girls and the youngsters will be dead tired by the time they arrive."

"We'll catch up to *them*, then," said Billy Speedwell, grimly, "on the home trip. I believe Chance Avery insisted on starting from the Court House so early just so we'd be behind."

"I reckon half-past six suited most of the town members, and those who live out this way," re-

2 SPEEDWELLS ON MOTORCYCLES

plied Dan. "But it certainly has made us hustle to get through the chores, and then to change our clothes and come from our house on the other side of the town."

"He knew he'd bother us," repeated Billy.

"Pshaw! Perhaps he never thought of us at all," rejoined Dan.

"I'll wager he did. Come on, Dan! there's the forks of the road just ahead."

The Riverdale Outing Club had settled on this beautiful evening for a moonlight run to Upton Falls. The club members all owned bicycles, some of them motorcycles, and these evening outings were popular. It was something like two hours' hard pedaling to Upton Falls, where there was a hotel, and the moon would rise before it was time to return to Riverdale.

But the moon did not help these two belated members of the club to see the tracks of the party ahead, when they arrived at the forks. One road—the pike—went across the hills to Upton Falls; the other followed the windings of the river. The latter was by far the pleasanter way; but Dan and Billy Speedwell wished to overtake their friends, if possible, before the end of the run.

"Now we're up a tree!" declared the younger boy, bringing his vehicle to an abrupt stop, and leaping off. "Didn't you hear which road they were to take, Dan?"

His brother swung himself off his own wheel without replying, and lifted off the lamp. He flashed the spotlight ray over the much-traveled road and in a moment said:

"Why, their tracks are plain enough, Billy. They took the pike—see the marks of the tires?"

Suddenly the younger boy clutched his brother by the sleeve, reaching for Dan's lamp with his other hand.

"Sh!" Billy whispered. "Who's that?"

Dan, in surprise, turned in the direction his brother swung the lamp's ray. A man's shadow passed swiftly across the road just beyond the forks, disappearing instantly into the brush which bordered the pike on the left.

On the right was the high stockade-fence of the Darringford Machine Shops. The plant occupied a piece of ground with an eighth of a mile frontage on the pike, while on the left of the highway was a waste of hillock and valley, covered for the most part with scrubby trees and brush, the hedgerow at the very roadside masking a deep gully. The figure which disappeared so quickly had crossed from the machine shop fence and plunged down this steep embankment.

"What do you know about *that*?" demanded Billy, eagerly. "Did you see him?"

"Why, I saw somebody; or, I thought I did," admitted Dan, slowly.

"Pshaw! Don't say you did not see that man with the rat-trap."

"With the *what?*" cried his brother, in amazement.

"Just as plain as though 'twas daylight! A rat-trap under his arm—one of those cage traps, you know," said Billy. "He was snooping along there by the fence when I first saw him. But he must have heard us speaking, or seen the light, so he started to cross the road."

"Funny place to set a rat-trap," observed Dan, preparing to mount his bicycle again, having returned the lamp to the fixture on which it hung.

"That wasn't the funniest thing about the man," said Billy, slowly following his brother's example. When they were both pedaling along the road again Billy repeated it: "That wasn't the funniest thing about him."

"What was so wrong with him?" inquired Dan, curiously.

"When I shot the lamp at him there was something hanging before his face. I saw it before he could turn his back to us," said Billy, cautiously. "I suppose you'll laugh, but it looked like a mask to me—a mask with a skirt to it that hid his entire face and fell down to his vest."

"You're seeing things, boy!" cried Dan, laughing. "A man in a mask, and with a rat-trap under his arm! Can you beat it?"

"I said you'd laugh," grumbled Billy. "But you know there's been trouble at the machine shops. Some of those discharged foreigners recently stoned Mr. Frank Avery in the street."

"Oh, but that was some time ago," returned Dan, easily. "They've all left town, and the trouble has quieted down. There isn't going to be any strike. The old hands are too well satisfied with the Darringfords, even if they are a bit sore on Avery."

"Those Averys are trouble-breeders," observed Billy. "Frank got the shops in trouble just as soon as he was made superintendent; and Chance Avery is doing his best to spoil our club. If they can't boss everything and everybody, they're not satisfied. As long as all the members couldn't afford motorcycles, none of them should be allowed on these runs, Dan."

His brother laughed again.

"So *that's* where the shoe pinches, eh?" chuckled Dan. "But how about if Billy Speedwell owned a motorcycle?"

"A—well—now——" began the younger lad, and just then, having already traveled at a swift pace for several miles, they heard voices and saw the flash of a lamp or two ahead. "Here's the rear guard, Dannie!"

They buckled down to it and swiftly overtook the laggards. Of course, there were only bicycles

6 SPEEDWELLS ON MOTORCYCLES

in the rear of the procession, and the club was strung out along the pike for more than a mile, instead of wheeling in a compact and more social body. The motor machines and the tandems were up ahead, and the fun of the outing was a good deal spoiled by the hard work which the members had to put in. The Speedwell boys were not the only ones of the Riverdale Outing Club who grumbled at the pace set by the president of the association.

"Chance never would have owned a motorcycle if his brother wasn't boss of the shops," said "Biff" Hardy, who worked in the Darringford plant himself and rode a rattletrap of a machine that he had bought for a trifle, and rebuilt in his spare hours. "He had the pick of those made in the shops last year. But we've got improvements on pattern now; this year's output are dandies!"

Billy Speedwell sighed. "I do wish I owned one," he said.

Dan had already run ahead and joined a group of the feminine members of the club. There was a certain black haired girl, whose blue eyes expressed her pleasure at Dan Speedwell's appearance, more than did her simple greeting.

"We were afraid you and Billy would not get here, Dan," Mildred Kent said. "You have to get up so early in the morning."

"We came pretty near missing it, as it was," replied Dan, cheerfully. "You see, we have to go after the milk, and ice the cans before we can leave in the evening."

"It was just horrid early for the run, anyway!" cried the girl who rode beside Mildred—a vivacious, eager, younger girl with bronze hair—the boys called it "red" when they wanted to tease Lettie Parker. "I came away without any supper and I'm as hungry as a bear!" she added.

"You frighten me," declared Mildred, smiling. "If you are as savage as all that, you may eat somebody before you get half way to the Falls."

"I could just *bite* Chance Avery," said Lettie, promptly. "If it hadn't been for him I wouldn't have gone without my supper. There was no need of starting so early—especially for those who own motors."

"If you're going to bite anybody, would you mind biting *me*?" asked Billy half seriously. "It'll take my mind off our troubles," and he proffered his cheek invitingly.

"Oh, I guess I'll wait until I'm hungrier," spoke Lettie, with a laugh in which the others joined.

"I wish we *all* owned motorcycles," declared Mildred. "I have tried Cousin Ed's. It's splendid to be able to go so fast—and with so

little exertion. I hear the club is going clear to Barnegat on Saturday afternoon. I know mother will not let me 'bike' so far. She says we all overexert ourselves on these long runs."

"I'm going!" said Lettie, with confidence. "I'm going to hire a machine. I've tried a motorcycle, and they're just splendid, *I think*."

Some of the other girls who were near enough to overhear this conversation, joined in it. They were all determined to buy, borrow, or hire motorcycles for the Barnegat run. And, of course, Dan Speedwell knew that several of the boys would do the same. Many of the club members were well able to afford the luxury; but Dan and Billy were poor.

The Speedwells had a small farm on the outskirts of Riverdale, and ran a dairy. Dan and Billy delivered the milk to customers in the town every morning, and they had to rise by two o'clock, milk the cows, cool the milk, and so were on the road with two small wagons by half-past four. Mr. Speedwell was a hard-working man, but not strong; the boys' mother was a cheerful, sensible woman. There were two children beside Dan and Billy—Carrie, ten years old, and Baby 'Dolph, who was just toddling around and beginning to talk.

At the Falls, while they were partaking of the simple refreshments that had been prepared, and

afterward, the principal topic of conversation was the run planned for the following Saturday afternoon. Barnegat was thirty miles or more from Riverdale, and there were hills to climb. Many of the younger members, and the girls, would be unable to go unless they had power machines. One or two parties would go in automobiles; but most of the members objected to that. The Riverdale Outing Club was primarily a cycling association.

It was the consensus of opinion, however, that only those members who could obtain the use of motorcycles would be able to make the run to Barnegat, and a "consolation run" was talked of for the others, to some nearer point.

"But that isn't of any use," said Billy Speedwell to Dan, as the club prepared for the homeward run. "We are bound to split up. There will soon be two clubs in Riverdale, and the town isn't big enough to properly support two. How will we ever get a club house if we keep on this way? I tell you, Chance Avery is doing us a lot of harm. He should never have been made captain."

The moon flooded the road with ample light when they started for Riverdale, and the return run promised to be very enjoyable, despite the friction in the club. The road was good, not too dusty, and the Speedwells trundled along very

pleasantly in the moonlight. When they reached the long stretch of fence belonging to the Darringford shops they slowed down.

"Where do you suppose your masked man with the rat-trap is?" asked Dan.

As he spoke both boys caught sight of a moving figure in the shadow of the fence. It darted across the road and plunged into the fringe of bushes. By mutual consent the boys stopped and sprang off their wheels.

"There's something doing here, Dan, as sure as you live!" exclaimed Billy. "Let's look into it."

Before his brother could object, the younger boy ran across the road and followed the mysterious stranger through the hedge. Dan only waited to snatch his lamp from its fixture, and then ran after the impetuous Billy.

There was a narrow path at this point winding down the steep side of the gully. Billy was already running down this when Dan came with his lamp to the brink of the descent.

He was out of sight in an instant, but Dan heard him shout:

"Come on! Here he is, Dan!"

The older Speedwell lad followed, fearing that Billy would run into some peril. And before he reached the bottom of the hill he heard the younger boy scream. Then followed a crashing

noise, and Dan reached the end of the gully with a rush. He found the bottom mostly clear of bushes, but neither the moon nor the ray of his lantern revealed his brother or the mysterious stranger.

CHAPTER II

THE OLD CATCH BASIN

FOR half a minute Dan Speedwell stood motionless, straining his ears to catch a sound from his brother. Lack of caution was always Billy's fault; and he had heedlessly followed the man who had been lurking about the Darringford premises.

"What's happened to the boy?" whispered the older brother. "Has that fellow harmed him?"

He flashed the ray of the bicycle lamp about the cleared space. For the moment he was confused and amazed. Then he heard, and it seemed rising from under the earth at his very feet, a hollow voice which uttered this warning:

"Look out how you step, Dan! Look out!"

"Billy!" gasped the older brother. "For pity's sake, what's happened?"

"I fell in—look out! You'll have the whole place caved in on me, Dan."

The latter saw the break in the clump of low bushes, then almost within reach of his hand.

Another incautious step and he might have followed the caving brink of the pit to the bottom.

He forgot all about the stranger they had been following; the mystery of that individual was quite unimportant now.

Dan Speedwell was level-headed. He had been frightened; but he had his wits about him again in a moment. The lamp in his hand gave illumination sufficient for him to see what he was about. He dropped on his knees and crept to the broken place in the clump of bushes.

These had masked the mouth of the pit, well, or whatever it was Billy had tumbled into. The older boy saw the jagged ends of rotting timbers and boards. There had been a wooden top over the hole, and Billy's weight, when he plunged through after the strange man, had burst this cover. A sudden thought came to Dan, and he cried:

"Are you alone down there, Billy?"

"Great Peter! I should think I was," exclaimed the younger boy. "I wish that chap I was chasing *had* fallen in first—then I'd have had something to land on beside rocks and dirt. The sides of this old well are cemented, and some of the stones have fallen down. It's lucky I didn't break my neck."

Dan left the bicycle lamp on the ground by the open well, and hurried back to the street. There

were houses not far away, but he shrank from waking sleeping citizens at this hour. Besides, if he could get a rope he would need no help at all.

There lay his wheel beside the road; he could easily run into town and obtain a rope at a livery stable, or some such place, where he knew somebody would be awake. He leaped upon the machine and started toward Riverdale at racing speed. But all the time his mind kept pace with his legs in action. What explanation should he make of the cause which led to Billy's accident?

For Dan had arrived at the conclusion that there was a serious mystery connected with the man who carried the rat-trap, and whom Billy had declared was masked. The young fellow's caution forbade his taking anybody and everybody into his confidence.

The strange man had been lingering about the plant of the Darringford Machine Shops all the evening, it was likely. It was a natural conclusion that he had been there for no good purpose—especially as he seemed so desirous of escaping observation. Dan felt that the matter should be reported to the Darringfords, or their representatives, instead of being made a matter of public gossip.

It was this thought that caused the young fellow to slow down when he saw a red light be-

side the road. He remembered that he and Billy had passed here an excavation which had been made in the street for the laying of water pipes. There was a tool shed here and a watchman was smoking his pipe beside the shack. From this man Dan procured a stout rope.

Without his bicycle he was some minutes returning to the gully where Billy was held prisoner. Indeed, when he did arrive he was greeted by a hollow voice from the bottom of the well, with:

"I say! I thought you would never come, Dannie. What kept you?"

Dan told him, while he made arrangements to let down a noose and so pull his brother to the surface. He found a log which he dragged across the mouth of the hole. Standing on this he let down the rope, Billy slipped one leg into the noose and Dan (who was very strong for his age and size) began to draw him up. The younger lad caught at the sides of the basin and aided in his own rescue to a degree; but an injured ankle made this the more difficult.

Finally he sat on the ground, holding his ankle, and thankful indeed to have escaped. Dan was serious over it!

"This is a bad scrape, Billy," he said. "Can you ride?"

"Get me on the wheel and I'll make her go with one pedal," declared Billy, between groans.

"I reckon I haven't broken anything; but I gave the joint an awful wrench."

"It's going to knock you out of delivering the milk this morning, boy," added his brother, with increased anxiety. "Yes! it is already past midnight. We must get home as fast as we can. The folks will be worried."

"But what will we do about that fellow we were chasing?"

"We never should have followed him," grumbled Dan. "If we had minded our own business you wouldn't have got into the hole."

"Oh, I know all about that," returned the younger boy. "But the Darringfords ought to know about that fellow. There's trouble brewing."

It was after one o'clock when the Speedwells reached home. There was a light in the kitchen, and they found their mother there. She was, naturally, worried by their late return. There was no time for Dan to go to bed, for he would be obliged to do Billy's share of the chores as well as his own. Mrs. Speedwell pronounced Billy's ankle merely sprained, when she had examined it; but he could not go on his route that morning.

"I'll get off as soon as I can and carry my milk," said Dan. "Ask father to drive in Billy's wagon, and I'll meet him when I have been

around my route, and will deliver to Billy's customers. That's the best we can do."

Dan hurried around his own route as fast as possible. When he met his father with Billy's wagon it was only half past six; but that was pretty late for some of the younger boy's customers. At Dr. Kent's house Mildred was waiting at the side gate, looking up and down the street for the milk wagon.

"You boys must have overslept yourselves after that run to the Falls," was her greeting. "And where's Billy?"

"He met with a small accident. Hurt his foot," returned the young Speedwell lad, lingering a moment at the gate, for he was fond of Mildred.

As they spoke together Chance Avery came quickly along the sidewalk and, without noticing Dan, spoke to the girl:

"I hope you are going to be with us on Saturday, Miss Mildred?"

"I sha'n't miss that run to Barnegat if I can help it; but I'm not sure that I can get a motor-cycle."

"Oh, I hope you will!" declared Chance. "We want all the lady members of the club along."

"And how about the members who can't get motors?" put in Dan.

"It's not too long a run for a bicycle," said Chance, shortly.

"It's too long at the pace you set," was Dan's quick response.

"Oh, you duffers make me tired!" exclaimed the captain of the club. "You'd better go off by yourselves and start a club of your own."

The sneering tone Avery used stung Dan Speedwell to anger, although he usually was master of his temper. He turned back to the gate, saying quickly:

"I do not speak for the minority of the club, Avery, but for the majority. And for the majority of the original members, too. We could have opposed the membership of anybody who used a motorcycle if we liked; but that would be a dog-in-the-manger business. We're not all able to own power machines; but I believe those who only ride bikes should have consideration shown them in the planning of the club runs and in the pacing of the same."

"You think a whole lot, don't you?" sneered Avery. "Run along and deliver your milk, sonny. If you don't like the way I run the club, get up at a proper time and in a proper place, and kick about it."

"I certainly shall do that," declared Dan, more coolly, but with increased anger.

"Then that's all right," said Chance, and,

turning his back upon Dan again, he tried to monopolize Mildred's attention.

But the doctor's daughter showed her disapproval of Avery most emphatically by hurrying into the house with the bottle of milk, while Dan drove away. As soon as he had delivered the last bottle he went to the offices of the Darrington Shops. His intention was to see young Robert Darrington, if possible; but, by ill luck, he met Mr. Francis Avery, the superintendent.

"What do you want, young man?" asked the superintendent, halting for a moment on his way out. He habitually was brusque and domineering; and as he prided himself upon settling small matters off-hand, he probably thought Dan was looking for work.

"I chanced to make a discovery last evening—or, my brother made it—that I believe you and Mr. Darrington should know about, sir," said Dan.

"What discovery? Who's your brother—an inventor?" asked the superintendent.

"No, sir. We were riding past the rear of the shops on our bicycles, when we saw a man lurking about there—we saw him twice—at the time we were running over to Upton Falls, and then again as we returned."

"Humph! what was the matter with the man? What was he doing?"

"I could not tell you that. But he seemed desirous of hiding from observation on both occasions when we saw him, and Billy was sure he wore some kind of a mask over his face."

"A mask! Tut, tut! you've been dreaming," cried the superintendent.

"No. We were wide enough awake," said Dan, smiling. "We followed him into the gully across the road, in fact, and my brother fell into a hole there and hurt his foot. That's how the man got away without our learning his business."

"Come, come!" exclaimed Mr. Avery. "This sounds a good deal like nonsense."

At the moment the office door opened and Chance Avery came in.

"Hullo, Frank!" exclaimed the younger Avery, greeting his brother.

"Here, Chance," said the superintendent, quickly. "Maybe you know something about this."

Chance came forward and saw Dan. He scowled.

"You were on that run of the bicycle club last night," said the older brother. "Did you see anything of a man in a mask lurking about the back premises of these shops?"

"A man in a mask! I should say not!" exclaimed the captain of the wheel club.

"I don't see how you and your brother could

have seen anything of that kind and the other members of your organization be ignorant of it," said the superintendent to Dan, doubtfully.

"What! is that fellow giving you this cock-and-bull story?" exclaimed Chance Avery. "I wouldn't place too much credit in what he says."

Dan Speedwell uttered an angry exclamation and stepped toward the younger Avery; but Frank opposed him.

"Hold on! we won't have any quarreling here," he said, sharply. "You'd better get out, and don't bring into the offices any more foolish stories about masked men, and the like. We don't pay for such information."

The sneer, and the slur cast upon his honesty, enraged Dan Speedwell. He turned on his heel, however, and, without a word, left the offices of the Darringford Machine Shops.

CHAPTER III

“ FIRE ! ”

DAN SPEEDWELL had been up the road with the double wagon picking up the milk from the dairies, while Billy did the chores. Mr. Speedwell did not own enough cows to supply all their customers. The older boy backed the team into the pocket by the milkhouse, and set the big cans in the cooler for the night. It was Friday evening—the day before the big run to Barnegat.

As Dan was about to unfasten the tugs of the off horse, Billy, who was half way up the granary stairs, gave a sudden whoop.

“ Look there, Dan! Fire! ”

The older boy ran up the little incline to the front of the barn. The evening was already closing in, and it was dark enough so that the single tongue of red flame streaked the dark background of the sky like a flaming torch.

“ It’s in town! ” gasped Dan. “ Do you suppose it is the Court House? ”

But Billy could locate the fire better, being so much higher from the ground.

"It's the shops—it's Darringfords'!" he shouted. "There go the bells, Dan! It's a big fire!"

The fire alarm now rang out clamorously. Every bell in town had taken up the tocsin. Riverdale had no paid fire department, but the gongs would arouse the volunteer company, and every active citizen as well.

Dan dashed back to the impatient Bob and re-fastened the harness.

"Come on!" he shouted to his brother. "We'll drive down and see if we can help."

Billy was in the wagon as quickly as Dan himself. As they drove out of the yard their mother and Carrie came to the door.

"Fire!" shouted Billy. "The machine shops are burning."

"Be careful of the team, boys!" cried their mother, warningly.

But Dan was not likely to endanger the horses. When they drove into town everybody was running toward the far side where the machine shops were situated, and the flames were then wrapping the tower of the biggest building of the plant in a fiery mantle.

The older Speedwell had fastened the horses securely behind Mr. Appleyard's store. Then he raced with Billy toward the scene of the conflagration, joining an ever increasing crowd of excited

men, women and children. Several hundred persons had already assembled. The fire in the central structure of the great shops had gained already terrific headway.

Hose was already attached to the fireplugs in front of the machine shop when the Speedwell boys arrived. The volunteers had entered the main building from two points; but these streams of water seemed to have little effect on the fire.

"It started with an explosion—I heard it!" exclaimed Biff Hardy to the Speedwells. "We were just sitting down to supper. I tell you, if it had happened when all the hands were at work, a fire spreading as quick as that would have caught some of us."

"And is everybody out of the main building?" asked Dan, anxiously.

"Sure! I saw Johnny Pepper, the watchman. And who else would be around the place after hours?"

"Nobody in the offices?"

"Mr. Avery stays sometimes; but there he is over yonder," said young Hardy.

Just then a furiously driven pair of horses, drawing a light carriage, dashed up to the edge of the crowd. Many of the spectators turned to look at the old gentleman who sat beside the negro driver, and who leaned from his seat shouting for Frank Avery.

"It's old Mr. Darringford!" the word went around.

"Where do you suppose Robert is?" asked Billy Speedwell of the group of his chums with whom he stood.

This question was being repeated all about them. Of late the younger Darringford had controlled the business, and his father seldom appeared at the shops. Billy Speedwell drew nearer to the carriage, his curiosity aroused. He saw Mr. Avery, his face flushed, and his manner excited, shoulder his way to the front, and Billy was near enough to overhear what passed between Mr. Darringford and the superintendent.

"Oh, Mr. Darringford! isn't this dreadful? Isn't it a shame?" stammered the superintendent. He was a woefully excited man, not at all his brusk and assured self.

The old gentleman paid no attention to his superintendent's words. He fired one question at him—sharp as a whip-crack:

"Where's Robert? Where is my son, Mr. Avery?"

The superintendent's countenance blanched, the color receding and leaving his cheeks perfectly white. He glared at the old gentleman for some seconds quite speechless.

"Where's Robert?" cried Mr. Darringford again, rising in his seat. "He was to stay to-

night to look over those specifications for the Woodford order. He telephoned home at ten minutes past six. He said he was alone then in his office. *Have you seen him?* ”

Avery at last found his voice; but it was weak indeed. “No, sir. I haven’t seen him,” he whispered. “I—I forgot he was to remain after the shops closed.”

Somebody grabbed Billy by the arm then. He turned to see his brother, and Dan’s eyes were sparkling with excitement.

“Come here!” the older Speedwell said. “What did you tell me about the hole in the wall of that old catch-basin? You remember!”

“I should say I did,” replied Billy. “When we were chasing that man with the rat trap?”

“Sh! Come away from the crowd. There is a culvert from that old well into the yard of the machine shop. It used to open directly into the court between those buildings.”

“The culvert was open all right when I tumbled into the hole,” murmured Billy, still puzzled by his brother’s vehemence.

“Come on, then!” cried Dan, vigorously, and having reached the edge of the crowd of spectators, he set off on a sharp run toward the back of the machine shop premises. Billy kept up with him, despite certain twinges in his lame ankle. Breathlessly he demanded:

"What's got you, Dan?"

"I had another talk with that old man who loaned me the rope to get you out of the basin. He says the culvert has a loose grating over it in that court. And Mr. Robert's private office windows look into that court. Do you see, Billy?"

"Oh, Dan tell somebody—let's get them to help us!" cried the younger boy.

"We'd have to stop and explain it all. Maybe they wouldn't believe us," answered Dan. "Come on, Billy! You can let me down into that hole, and if the culvert is open I'll find my way through it."

The log Dan had dragged across the hole when he rescued Billy from the place, had not been moved. The older Speedwell lad threw off his coat, saw that his brother was safely placed astride the log, and then let himself down by the tails of his jacket, Billy clinging meanwhile to the arms. The garment was strong, and it enabled Dan to lower himself until the soles of his shoes were four or five feet from the bottom of the basin. When he let go and dropped he fortunately landed without hurting himself.

"All right, Billy!" he called up. "The culvert is open, I see. And I've got plenty of matches. You stay right where you are till I come back."

Billy promised, and Dan entered the old drain, which was made of cement, and was nearly three

feet in diameter. He was, as he had said, amply supplied with matches, and he scratched one after another as he hurried through the culvert; sometimes scrambling on his hands and knees, but, for the most part, running in a stooping posture. The slightly ascending passage was easily climbed; there was no rubbish to retard him. In less than a hundred seconds after last calling to his brother, Dan Speedwell had entered under the fence, crossed the space of the machine shop yards, and passed beneath the foundation walls of the inner half of the main building.

The boy hesitated. Impulse had urged him on; but it seemed as though he could venture no farther. And for what purpose? The court in the middle of the office building must be a mass of flames. Nobody could be alive there now.

And even as Dan Speedwall shrank before the breath of the fire, a scream rose above the roaring of the flames; and then an agonized voice cried:

“ Help! help! Save me! ”

With an answering shout Dan sprang forward. He reached the grating that covered the end of the drain. In the glare of the flames he saw a blackened countenance pressed close to the iron bars, while two hands shook the grating madly. Disfigured as the victim was, young Speedwell recognized the face of Robert Darrington!

CHAPTER IV

THROUGH FLAMES AND SMOKE

THE grating over the throat of the old drain was an iron frame with the bars welded to it. The whole lifted out in one piece; but it was evident to Dan Speedwell at first glance that the grating was rusted in, and that Mr. Darringford had already put forth all his strength to dislodge the drain-cover, and had failed!

Blazing brands were dropping all about the imprisoned man. At the bottom of that airshaft, or court, in the middle of the building, Darringford had no chance of escape, save through the drain. Meanwhile he lay exposed to the rain of burning debris, scorched by the flames and almost smothered by the smoke.

But Dan Speedwell's acute mind had already planned his rescue, and now he was not to be daunted.

He dashed at the grating from the under side. A sudden current of air sucked the smoke down into the drain and Dan was all stifled; but he fought his way to the opening and seized the bars.

For an instant he touched one of Mr. Darringford's burned hands, and he heard the young man cry in agony.

That exclamation of pain inspired Dan to do his utmost. He gave no heed to his own danger. The drain had come almost to the surface of the court, and Dan was able to creep up under the grating and get his back against it.

Then, on all fours, stung by innumerable falling cinders, the boy braced against the grating and heaved with all his might. He felt the grating give, and wondered why he could not raise it altogether. For half a minute he struggled to rise and push up the ironwork.

And then he realized that Mr. Robert Darringford had fainted and lay—a dead weight—upon the cover of the drain!

The man was big, and an athlete, weighing more than one hundred and eighty pounds; Dan Speedwell, though a sturdy young fellow, was not able to bear that weight, with the heavy grating likewise, on his shoulders. He had to give over the attempt and for a moment feared that Darringford's unfortunate collapse had cost him his life.

Then suddenly the man above moved. He rolled sideways, and cried again. Part of a burning latticework had fallen from the roof and the sting of it across Darringford's shoulders made

him writhe, and, in the fact, brought him to his senses. Dan's face was scorched by the flaming debris as well; but he fought back the cry of pain that rose to his own lips, and again heaved up against the grating.

It gave way. Mr. Darrington rolled farther off and the boy was able to force aside the barrier.

In a moment he climbed through. He could not see the man for the smoke that had settled to the bottom of the shaft again. And through this vapor fell the blazing brands, as impossible to dodge as raindrops.

"Mr. Darrington! Mr. Darrington!" cried Dan, and in his own ears his voice sounded hoarse and distant.

He staggered about the place, his hands outstretched, groping in the murk for the man he had come to save. Finally he fell upon his prostrate body, and this aroused Darrington once more.

"Get me out! get me out!" Dan heard him mutter.

The boy shouted in his ear: "Get down into the drain! Hurry up! We'll both be buried under this falling wreckage if you don't! This way—this way!"

He pushed the bewildered man to the opening. Darrington sprawled through like a huge frog.

His boots waved for a moment before Dan Speedwell's face, and then he slid down the rather sharply inclined drain, out of sight.

"Keep on! Keep on going!" shouted Dan, and was about to follow him when a sound from above made him turn and look up. It was a tearing, rasping crash—the breaking asunder of brickwork and iron. A mass of brick and mortar fell directly in front of him.

Dan leaped backward and leaned against the wall of the building. Where he had stood beside the entrance to the old drain, the rubbish fell. His escape had been by a narrow margin. But his feeling of thankfulness for this was but momentary. The great pile of rubbish had completely buried the mouth of the drain. The man he had come to aid would—perhaps—escape; but Dan Speedwell was left at the mercy of the flames and smoke!

"I'll be buried alive if I stay here!" groaned the boy, and impulsively he turned to the building wall behind him, found an open window, and climbed over the sill.

He had scarcely fallen upon the floor of this room when, with a roar, one sidewall of the shaft fell in completely. A lot of the rubbish burst in the upper part of the window behind Dan. It rained all about him and he staggered blindly through the smoke away from the opening. He

found a wall, then a door; opened it, and dashed out of the room.

He had come into a corridor he knew, and the smoke was less dense. Wisely he dropped to the floor and there, on all fours, found that he could breathe more easily. But he could not see, and scrambled blindly along the corridor, finally bumping his head sharply against the newel-post of a stair.

It was a flight leading upward. Behind him, at the far end of the corridor, the flames were crackling. The rolling smoke began to be tinged by a deep yellow glow. Dan knew that the fire was following him.

The smoke and heat were dreadful. Dan thought at that instant that he would be overtaken on the landing. But he staggered around the turn of the stairs and found himself at the foot of another flight. His shoulder crashed against a window, and the glass splintered. Instantly the smoke was sucked through that opening, and realizing that this vent might aid him, Dan flung up the lower sash as far as it would go. The smoke poured out of this aperture and the boy saw that the flight of stairs above him was clearer.

Thankful indeed for this small respite, he stumbled up to the third floor. At the bottom of the next flight was another window and he opened it. He realized then that he was facing

the street on which the building fronted. There was a wide lawn before the factory, and this open space was occupied by the fire apparatus and the crowd that had gathered. He heard the murmur of the people's voices, and the swish of the water through the hosepipes.

But the boy remained here only for a moment or two. The fire was driving up the stair-well behind him. He was forced to seek a refuge above and he turned to mount the next flight. Then he uttered a cry of exultation.

"A door!"

At the foot of these stairs swung a heavy door. Dan darted up two steps and pulled the portal shut behind him. The spring lock clicked sharply, and he was in perfect darkness. It was a tightly fitted door and little smoke could penetrate the cracks. After a minute or so, he could breathe quite easily.

But the heat in the shut-in place was intense and Dan soon began to climb upward again. He knew this respite was not for long. The flames were following him up, and up.

On the fourth floor he stopped again. It was little lighter in the narrow hall than on the stair-case, but in fumbling about he discovered a door. He fell against this, threw it open, and knew at once that he was in one of the long draughting rooms. The windows of this room at the rear

looked out into the airshaft from which he had so providentially escaped when the wall fell. At the other end they overlooked the open space before the main door of the building. Almost as Dan entered and closed the door behind him, one of the rear windows, overheated by the fire, cracked and the flames poured in!

The fire swept in at the window, licking up the woodwork until, in a few seconds, it was advancing in a wall of flames that spread from one side to the other of the great room, and reached from floor to ceiling.

The scorched and breathless boy turned again to flee. He missed the door by which he had entered and stumbled on to the front windows. The smoke was filling the draughting room now, and the heat grew in intensity, second by second. He threw up one of the great windows for the sake of air.

It was an almost fatal act. The draught thus created sucked the fire along at twice its former speed. Dan fell across the sill and hung there, the curtain of flames behind, the smoke belching out about him in a stifling cloud.

CHAPTER V

BILLY TAKES A HAND

MEANWHILE Billy Speedwell, astride the log over the old catch-basin, was becoming very much worried indeed. And for good reason.

Down there in the gulley behind the machine shops he could see nothing of the fire but the growing illumination against the overcast sky, and could only hear a murmur of the throng gathered on the other street—the street on which the big office building fronted.

And Dan had been gone a long time.

“Something has happened to him,” thought the anxious Billy.

And forgetting the promise he had given his brother, to remain where he was, Billy began to look about for some means of getting to the bottom of the basin. This he found in a stout cedar pole lying near by, down which he climbed.

Billy was well supplied with matches, too. He went boldly into the drain, and finding it comparatively clear of rubbish, he only struck a light

now and then, sheltering the tiny flames in his cupped hands as he pressed forward.

The smoke stung his eyes and throat and the atmosphere grew painfully warm as he advanced; but Billy pressed forward until he reached the first grating in the roof of the drain. The smoke, driven to the ground in the yard of the machine shops in a sort of whirlwind, was finding an outlet through this grating, and Billy could scarcely breathe until he was past it.

A few yards farther, while groping ahead in the darkness, he stumbled over an object lying on the bottom of the drain. In fact, he sprawled upon it completely, and at the first touch Billy Speedwell screamed aloud.

"Dan! It's Dan!" he cried. "He's dead!"

Creeping off the prone body, he found a match in desperate haste and scratched it on the dry cement wall. When it flared up he could see the motionless body, and still believed it to be his brother until he managed to roll it face upward.

"Mr. Robert! And he's alive!" cried Billy, as the match burned down to his fingers, and he had to drop it.

The younger Darringford was badly burned, and was blackened by smoke. But he moved and groaned at that very instant, proving to Billy that he was by no means dead. Young Speedwell was still thrilled with anxiety, regarding Dan.

Without trying to arouse Darringford he pushed on through the drain, facing the smoke and heat. Dan was somewhere beyond and Billy feared much for his brother's safety. Suppose he, too, had fallen in the narrow passage, overcome by the heat and smoke?

And perhaps, when Billy reached the end of the drain and discovered it to be choked with the mass of debris that had fallen into the inner court, he would have been relieved to find Dan in the same plight as Robert Darringford!

Was poor Dan under that pile of rubbish? Billy, illuminating the choked end of the drain with another match, could not keep the tears from flowing. The keen edge of his sorrow was sharpened by the fact—and he appreciated that fact almost instantly—that he could not dig into the pile to find his brother's body.

How was it that Robert Darringford had been saved when the wreck fell, and not Dan? Billy could easily believe that his brother had sacrificed himself to save the young master of the machine shops!

And with Mr. Robert was the key to Dan's disappearance. Billy, realizing this, hurried back to where the man lay. The latter had partially aroused, and was crawling painfully down the drain, away from the heat and smoke.

"I'm hurrying! I *am* hurrying!" he muttered.

"I—I thought you were shut out of the sewer. How did you escape?"

Billy knew that Mr. Robert took him for Dan. And the words explained completely what Dan had done. His brother had crawled out of the drain to help Mr. Darringford, had pushed the latter down to safety, and then had either lost his life under the falling rubbish, or had been cut off by it.

If his brother had escaped immediate death, Billy knew he was shut away from retreat through this drain. And if he would help him, it must be from some other direction.

Alone, Billy could have very quickly found his way to the end of the drain again; but he had a duty to perform in helping the half-conscious Darringford. Finally the boy was obliged to seize the man under his arms and, staggering backward, drag him to the end of the drain.

Here the air was clearer. Billy could not possibly get Darringford out of the well; but it was an easy matter for him to swarm up to the surface himself. Leaving the man there, Billy sped away from the gully, and around to the front of the machine shops.

As the boy came upon the main scene of the conflagration a great roar of sound went up from the throng. A puff of wind, driving the smoke aside, had cleared a space around a certain

window on the fourth floor of the building. And at that window a figure, outlined against the curtain of fire behind, appeared to startle the crowd.

"Mr. Robert! Young Darringford!" voices called.

Even the old gentleman in the carriage believed it was his son at the window and, standing upon the seat, he turned his quivering face upwards, unable to speak, but wringing his hands in agony. A wave of smoke then wiped out the picture at the window, and Mr. Darringford sank back with a cry that went straight to Billy Speedwell's heart.

Billy knew it was Dan up there—and Dan must be saved! But first he could comfort the heart-broken father.

"Mr. Darringford! Mr. Darringford!" shouted the boy, springing upon the carriage step so as to be heard above the general confusion. "Robert is all right—he's saved from the fire."

The old gentleman turned to gaze upon him in amazement, and others in the crowd drew near to listen.

"That's my brother Dan up there—Dan Speedwell," Billy hastened to explain. "Mr. Robert is all right. He's down yonder in the old catch-basin. Dan got him into the drain, you know——"

"What are you saying, boy?" demanded Mr.

Darringford, suddenly recovering command of himself.

"I know what he means, sir," declared the driver of the carriage. "There is an old drain, and it empties into a well back there in the hollow on the other side of the pike."

"Right!" exclaimed Mr. Darringford. "You say my son is there, boy?" Henry! drive out of this crowd at once. We must see if this is true——"

And Billy was fairly hurled from the carriage step, the driver wheeled the restive horses so quickly. The carriage whirled away, while Billy picked himself out of the dust.

"What do you think of *that*?" gasped the boy. "And they never gave a thought to poor Dan!"

"Do you mean to say it's Dan up there in the window of the draughting room?" shouted somebody in Billy's ear.

"Yep! He went through the old drain and got Mr. Robert out somehow; then the drain got choked with fallen rubbish. He's cut off."

"We've got to get him out!" exclaimed the boy's questioner, and Billy recognized Biff Hardy.

"How can we do it? There's no ladder long enough to reach the fourth floor."

"There he is again! It is Dan!" cried Hardy.

By this time many of the spectators were aware that a boy, and not a man, stood at the window

of the draughting room. The smoke billowed through the open casement all about poor Dan, and now and then it was sucked away and revealed him clearly in the firelight.

"Billy!" cried Biff, in the younger boy's ear, "Dan can save himself easy, if he only knew what *I* know."

"What do you mean, Biff?" cried Billy.

"There's a rope up there. A big coil of it. There's a coil in every room, and the one in the draughting room is hung under the very next window to the one Dan's at. It's there for a fire escape——"

"Oh! we must tell him!" gasped the younger Speedwell.

But even as he spoke, Billy realized that the sound of the rushing water and the voices of the crowd and the excited firemen would drown his own or Biff's voice—drown the sound completely! And, even were that not so, the roar and crackle of the flames would make it impossible for Dan to hear what was shouted to him from below.

"It we had a megaphone," cried Biff.

The captain of the hose company, however, had smashed his megaphone a few minutes before. And that instrument would not have carried the sound of their voices to Dan. Billy's brain seemed paralyzed for the moment. How could he get to his imperiled brother information of the fire rope hanging almost within reach of his hand?

CHAPTER VI

FINE TEAM WORK

BILLY SPEEDWELL, for a very few seconds only, remained inactive and nonplussed. He was thinking rapidly.

What would Dan do if he were in Billy's place, and it was Billy who was up there in that window, far above the heads of the crowd, threatened each moment by the advancing fire? That was the question that pounded in Billy Speedwell's ears.

"Quick, Biff!" shouted Billy. "Come over here and clear the folks away a bit. Make a circle with me in the middle. We'll attract Dan's notice, and then I can signal him. Hurry!"

There was an automobile standing near; but the men who had ridden to the fire in it were helping fight the blaze. Billy shouted to Biff Hardy to lift off a headlight of the machine. Then, standing upon the step, Hardy turned the lamp upon Billy, who stood out in the cleared place, facing the burning building.

The crowd, curious as to what the boys were doing, threatened to draw in and fill the empty space.

"Keep back! Keep back!" cried Billy. "Give us a chance to save my brother! Don't you see that he'll die if we can't get him out of that window in another minute?"

"What can you do for him down here, boy?" demanded one man.

"Watch me!" returned the confident Billy. "Keep back, please!"

"Keep away!" yelled Biff Hardy, shooting the ray of the headlight into the faces of the throng for an instant. "Give him air! Keep back!"

The people on the outskirts of the crowd thought somebody was hurt, and stopped pushing. Just then the smoke cleared from Dan's window again and the imperiled boy was seen by all. A murmur of apprehension rose from the throng; but nobody seemed to be able to suggest means for his release.

Billy, standing squarely in the glare of the light, struck an attitude—with arms outspread and legs apart—and then, with one hand and arm, stiffly signalled his brother's attention. He worked his arm like a semaphore; any person familiar with the code of signals used by the army and the naval battalion would easily understand Billy's motions.

And Dan understood!

The younger boy was sure he would. He and Dan had often practiced signalling in just that

way, from the hill back of their house to the roof of the shed—one standing upon each pinnacle.

Having gained Dan's notice, Billy rapidly spelled out the information he wished to convey. There was a coil of rope, long enough to reach from the fourth floor to the ground, hanging under the very next window in that draughting room, and Billy signaled this fact to his brother in a very few seconds.

Dan waved both hands to show that he understood, and darted back from the open window. Almost as he disappeared a tongue of flame, followed by a great balloon of smoke, belched out of the open casement.

A cry of horror arose from the crowd. Many thought that Dan Speedwell had been sucked down into the vortex of the fire!

But Billy had great faith in his brother. Now that Dan knew how to help himself, the younger boy was sure he would do so. With Biff Hardy he ran in close to the burning building—so close, in fact, that some of the firemen and town constables tried to keep them back.

"My brother's up there!" shrieked Billy. "We've got to catch him when he comes down the rope."

As he spoke the other window of the draughting room was opened. Dan appeared and, with the flames seemingly framing him as he stood on

the sill, he coolly set about the work of saving himself.

The rope was fastened by one end to a ring in the wall. It was all ready to be uncoiled and dropped to the ground. To an athletic person it offered an almost sure means of escape.

But even as Dan poised the coil of rope, and was about to drop it, there was a muffled explosion within the burning building, two or three windows on the second floor blew outwards, and the very wall itself bulged!

Flames and smoke leaped forth. The long, yellow, wicked tongues of fire licked up the side of the structure until they reached Dan Speedwell's feet! This sea of darting flames intervened between his perch and the ground—it shut him off in his attempt to escape.

If he dropped the coil of rope now it would be into the very heart of the fire—that blast would wither the strong hemp as it would pack-thread!

Dan Speedwell was in terrible danger—none knew it better than he did himself. Nevertheless, throughout all this frightful adventure he had not for a moment lost his head. He must do something now, and that within a very few seconds, to save himself from actual annihilation; yet he did not hesitate.

He threw up his arm to attract the attention of those below. The smoke parted sufficiently for

all to observe him. Then he whirled the coil of rope about his head, and flung it from him, as far as he could send the hurtling line.

Billy and Biff Hardy were two who sprang forward to seize the end of the rope. It was several yards longer than the distance from the window to the ground, and that was indeed a fortunate fact.

Billy understood Dan's frantic gestures; others saw the single remaining chance for the boy's escape, too. A dozen pair of sturdy hands seized the end of the rope; they dragged it out to its full length, and as far from the leaping flames as possible. The cable stretched on a slant from the window sill on that fourth floor to the ground; but between the crowd holding the end of the rope and the window there rolled a cloud of black smoke, through which darted angry tongues of fire.

Dan Speedwell, however, was not balked. Indeed, he had no margin of time left him for hesitancy. The fire was below him, behind him, above him; he was surrounded by the flames. Half a minute more and they would lick him off that window ledge, and he would fall to the ground.

Therefore the brave boy launched himself from his perch upon the rope. He wound his legs about the taut line and slid backwards. He shot through the wave of flame and smoke below him

at a speed that burned the palms of his hands. He landed in the arms of Billy and young Hardy, and a cheer went up from the crowd that drowned for a moment the crackle of the fire.

Then, with a thunderous crash, the front of the building for some yards fell outwards! Many of the firemen and helpers barely escaped the flying bricks. Billy and Biff dragged Dan back out of danger, and as far as the farther side of the street.

A gentleman pushed his way through the crowd that was congratulating the boys, and shook hands with Billy. Dan's hands were so raw that he could not bear to have them touched; and as soon as Biff caught sight of the gentleman, he slipped away.

"Fine team work that, boys!" declared this person, warmly. "You're a plucky pair of youngsters, and the town ought to be proud of you. Let's see; your name is Speedwell, isn't it?"

"Yes, sir," said Billy. "Come on, Dan. Let's go over to the drug store and get something done for your hands. And you're all scorched, too."

"He's been in a hot corner," said the gentleman, keeping pace with the Speedwells as they moved away. "I am told that it was by your aid that young Mr. Darringford was saved out of

the fire. His father has just driven off with him."

"I'm glad he got out," said Dan, fervently. "I thought he might have been lost, after all."

"It seems you went through the old drain and found him, didn't you?" asked the man.

Dan briefly related the adventure, and the other listened attentively, until the boys went into the drug store.

"Say, Dannie," said the younger Speedwell, "you sure spread yourself that time. And mother will be scared to death when she hears it."

"What do you mean?" demanded Dan. "Don't you tell her the particulars."

"She'll read it all in the *Riverdale Star*. Didn't you know you were talking for publication?"

"What! *Me*?" gasped Dan.

"Yep. That was Jim Blizzard, editor of the *Star*. When it comes out to-morrow you'll be a sure-enough hero."

CHAPTER VII

AFTER THE FIRE

BILLY was right on that point. The *Star* ran a special edition, more than a page of which was filled with an account of the disastrous fire at the Darringford Machine Shops. The main building of the plant was utterly ruined, and would have to be torn down; but fortunately the other buildings were not consumed, and the laboring people were not thrown out of work. A building in town was already secured for the clerks and draughtsmen, and work would be resumed in all departments within a few days.

This much was mere information; so, too, was much of the story of the fire, for Mr. Blizzard was a good writer. But when he came to describe "the heroic rescue of Mr. Robert Darringford," and "Young Speedwell's Slide for Life," he made Dan's ear-tips burn. The young fellow was glad that his burns and scarified palms kept him at home for a day or two.

And Billy was praised by the paper, too. But

Billy only laughed when the boys in town chaffed him. As, for a couple of days, he delivered the milk to all their customers, he had plenty of opportunity to discuss with curious people the topic which seemed to appeal most to them: "What will the Darringfords give you and Dan?"

Now, this question annoyed Billy; and it actually made Dan angry.

"I didn't help Mr. Darringford out of the fire for pay, nor did Billy," Dan said, sharply to one curious neighbor. "And I am very sure the Darringfords will not offer us money."

And, for the time at least, the Darringfords had something else to think about. Mr. Robert was ill in bed and his father took immediate charge of the machine shop affairs. Frank Avery had recovered his usual brusk and confident manner, and was threatening condign punishment for the one who had set the plant afire.

For that the conflagration was the work of an incendiary, there could be no doubt. The suddenness of the breaking-out of the flames, their rapid increase until, within a very few minutes they were beyond all control, showed plainly that the fire had been planned for. And the setting of the fire had been an act of such ingenuity that the local police, as well as city detectives, who were brought to the scene, were unable to point out the method followed by the criminal.

The one thing upon which the police and detectives agreed was the fact that the fire must have been caused by some mechanical device which acted after the workmen and clerks were out of the plant for the night. The object of the incendiary was to destroy property, not the lives of innocent persons. It could not be considered, even, as a direct plot against Robert Darringtonford, for it was not known until closing time, and then only to a few, that the young man intended to remain in his office after hours.

Billy was in town one afternoon, and with some of the other boys went to watch the workmen removing the walls and fallen debris of the burned building, as the Darringtonfords desired to rebuild as soon as the site could be cleared. In a city the space would have been roped off about the wreckage; but in a small town like Riverdale the police took no hand in such matters.

One of the boys with Billy Speedwell was the son of the contractor who was removing the rubbish, and therefore nobody challenged him or his friends when they climbed into the hollow where the bell-tower had stood.

This place had been first cleared by the detectives, searching for indications of incendiarism. The boys were able to jump down into the old basement and overhaul the half-burned beams and broken furniture. In a corner Billy came up-

on something, which at first glance interested him.

It was a common wooden box, with a sliding cover, some two feet long and eighteen inches high and wide. One end had been burned away; but inside were shreds of waste and half burned shavings; and back, in the unburned end, some kind of a wire cage.

Billy pushed back the slide and looked closer. In the box was a rat-trap, and beside it, and wired to the trigger of the trap, a contrivance of wheels and springs which Billy recognized as the works of a cheap clock.

"What you got there, Billy?" asked Jim Stetson, looking over the lad's shoulder.

"I don't just know. You don't suppose it's of value, do you, Jim?" added Billy, quickly.

"What! That thing?"

"Then your father won't mind if I take it away with me?"

"Of course not. Why, say! it's only a rat-trap. Johnny Pepper must have set it down here before the fire."

Billy made no reply. He wrapped the half burned box in a sheet of paper which he found, and carried it away under his arm. The contrivance had no real value; but Billy wanted to show it to Dan.

He carried it home and at the first opportunity showed it to Dan. He did not tell his brother

where he had found the cage-trap, but just asked him what he thought it was.

"Looks like you got it out of the fire, Billy," said the older boy. "Did you?"

"Never mind where I got it. Just say what you think it was built for."

Dan, seeing that he was in earnest, gave the contrivance his full attention. Although one end of the box had been burned (and seemingly some of the contents) the wire trap and the clock works were intact. The latter was fastened to the trigger of the trap very ingeniously. Dan soon found that, by winding the clock and setting the trap, he had a mechanical contrivance that worked perfectly without, as far as Dan could see, being of the least use.

"What under the sun did anybody ever want to rig a thing like this for?" he demanded of Billy. "Surely not to catch rats. You see, when the clock runs a certain length of time, it pulls the trigger of the rat-trap and snaps it shut. But what was there to catch? And it has been in a fire, Billy. I believe you must have got it down to the machine shops."

"Where did you see a rat-trap like that last?" demanded his brother.

"Me? I don't know. Not for a good spell, Billy. We haven't had one like it around the barn for an age."

"No. But we saw one not long ago."

"Not me!" declared Dan, earnestly.

"Well, I did, then; and I told you of it!"

Dan interrupted him with a sudden exclamation.

"You don't mean the man we saw that night we went to Upton Falls? The man with the mask? I had forgotten all about him."

"And I tell you he had a trap like this under his arm when he ran away from the machine shop fence," said Billy, with confidence.

Dan nodded. He gave his attention to the article before him for some minutes in silence. Then he sighed and shook his head.

"I don't understand it," he said. "You *did* find this in the ruins?"

Billy told him just where.

"That's where the fire broke out," declared Dan, emphatically. "And this thing was half burned——"

"Wait! here is something." He picked up several bits of wood, nothing more than splinters. He examined them carefully and then held them out on his palm to Billy.

"See? They are half burned matches. They were in this box. Why, Billy! can it be that the fire started in this box? There is a smell of oil about these rags and shavings. It's a mystery that the box did not completely burn; but of

course, the fire found an outlet upward. I don't know what to say," he concluded, slowly.

"It is something rigged to start the fire, Dan," said Billy, confidently.

"I wouldn't want to say so. Not without understanding it better," returned Dan. "Let's think it over."

"And take it to the Darringfords? Show it to Frank Avery?"

Dan had a very vivid remembrance of his reception by the superintendent of the machine shops when he had told that self-confident individual about the man he and Billy had seen hanging about the shops after dark. He shrugged his shoulders, and said:

"I reckon we'll let *that* fly stick on the wall, brother. "They don't seem very anxious to hunt us up; I don't see why we should trouble them at this time. It would seem as though we were looking for something."

CHAPTER VIII

THE BARNEGAT RUN

SATURDAY came, and the mystery of the fire at the Darringford shops was almost neglected as a topic of conversation among the young folks of Riverdale. The Barnegat run of the Outing Club was the important subject under consideration, and, as the hour of two drew near, the public square before the Court House became a lively spot indeed.

There were a number of the members who owned bicycles only, and who had been unable to obtain motorcycles; these were soon in a group by themselves and their excited talk betrayed the fact that the rules under which the run was to be held were not to their taste.

"It's just what I told you," said Biff Hardy. "Chance is bound to break the club all to flinders! You see, aside from the crowd going in Greene's and Henderson's automobiles, there are only twenty-two members with motorcycles. Altogether the club numbers more than a hundred active members. Where are they?"

"That's easily answered," chuckled Jim Stetson, who was just trundling his own motor machine past the group. "They haven't got here yet, Biff."

"And they won't get here!" declared young Hardy. "Altogether there will not be fifty per cent. of the membership show up for this run. It's a hard road. I have been over every foot of it, and I know."

"I hear that Chance says three hours is long enough to spend on the outrun," Fisher Greene said. His brother and sister had invited friends to accompany them in the family automobile, and Fisher had been crowded out.

"Three hours!" exclaimed Billy, excitedly. "Why, there is scarcely a fellow here who can make it in that time."

"I don't care. We leave at two, and the assembly will be sounded at Tryon's Casino in Barnegat at five," said Fisher.

"Why, that's actually brutal," said Dan Speedwell. "Ten miles an hour over such a road is a regular grilling pace. Chance Avery doesn't know what he's about!"

"And who told *you* so much, and your hair not curly?" demanded a voice behind him, and Dan, as well as the others, looked up to see Chanceford Avery, in his natty uniform, and carrying the bugle slung by a silk cord over his shoulder. He

used a "jollying" tone in speaking, but he scowled at Dan.

"Say, Captain," sputtered Fisher Greene, "do you expect the club to be ready to answer to roll-call at Tryon's at five o'clock?"

"That's the idea, youngster," said Chance. "And those that are not on hand will be demoted one class, of course. That's the rule. There won't be any time for you fellows to stop off and rob an orchard, or cut up any other didoes," and the captain laughed unpleasantly, and would have passed on, had not Dan Speedwell spoken again:

"Wait a moment, Avery. We wish to understand this clearly. Are you earnest in timing the run to Barnegat for three hours?"

"I certainly am. Cripples and children had better stay out of it."

"It is ridiculous! If you, yourself, were not riding a motorcycle you could not make it within that time," declared Dan.

Chance flushed and replied angrily:

"You have no authority for saying that, Speedwell. If you mean that *you* can't do it, that's another thing. Don't limit my powers, please, to ten miles an hour."

"But I do—if you attempted to go to Barnegat on a bike."

"Nonsense!"

"And it means that a large number of the

members of the club will not even start, so as not to lose class."

"Well," said Chance, scornfully, "I do not know that anybody will weep if *you* don't start, Speedwell; or your brother. I'm Captain, and I'm going to do what I think is best in this thing. You can believe that."

"I see you are determined to ruin the club," said Dan, gravely. "But there may be enough of us to beat you at that game."

"Pshaw! if you are such a mollycoddle that you can't keep up the pace, drop out, that's all!" snarled Chance. "But I'm sorry for you fellows if you can't do ten miles an hour."

"We can do it—and we will!" exclaimed Billy Speedwell, suddenly. "You can look for Dan and me at Tryon's, Avery, when you blow the assembly at five."

Dan had strolled over to where a group of the girl members were standing by their wheels. There were not half a dozen who had not obtained, in some way, the use of motorcycles. Mildred Kent and Lettie Parker were among these fortunate ones.

"We'll pace the rest of you girls," declared Lettie, cheerfully. "If you can't come along as fast, why we'll reduce speed and stay with you. Of course you'll be more tired than we are; but we'll all stick together."

"And where will we be at five o'clock when Chance says we must report in Barnegat?" demanded one of her friends.

"We'll report by telephone, if we can't any other way," laughed Lettie. "But I think Chance Avery is just mean!"

"Are you and Billy determined to go, Dan?" asked Mildred, privately.

"Yes. And Billy says we are going to get to Barnegat in the running," replied Dan, smiling. "But I believe we shall do some hard work to accomplish that. And my hands are pretty sore yet."

"You poor fellow!" Mildred said. "And didn't the Darringfords even *thank* you and Billy for what you did?"

Dan flushed. "We didn't do anything more than other persons would have done, had they known of the old drain. And I'm glad they haven't made any splurge about it. What was in the paper was bad enough."

"I think it was a fine thing for you to do, and Billy was just as brave," said Mildred, quietly.

At that moment the assembly sounded on Avery's bugle. There was a crowd of spectators in the square and they cheered the Outing Club as the members that intended to start the run wheeled into a solid phalanx before the Court House steps.

Avery stood beside his motor until all had assembled. Then he blew a single blast on the bugle, and immediately hopped into his saddle. In a moment the staccato exhaust of his motorcycle began to deafen the crowd along the sidewalk.

One after another the other motorcyclists got under way—amid a good deal of noise, and smell, and dust. Behind them fell in the bicycles, and after they had all moved out of the square, the several automobiles likewise started.

"Don't you want a tow up the hill, Fisher?" cried his sister from the back seat of the Greene car.

"We'll save you some supper, Fish!" cried another of the party. "You'll be dead beat when you get to Tryon's."

"And that's what we'll all be," said Biff Hardy, to Dan and Billy. "See 'em trying to plug up this heart-breaking hill as though it was the last lap. Why, we've only begun! We'll be broken down before we get to Schuter's if we don't reduce speed."

But Billy and Dan kept grimly at it. They thought they knew about how much grilling they could stand, and both had in mind Billy's promise to Chance Avery. They were determined to be at the Barnegat terminus of the run when the captain called the roll.

CHAPTER IX

THE MAN IN THE FLAG SHANTY

THE Speedwells were ahead of the other bicyclists when the rear guard got over the first hard hill. Fisher Greene and Biff Hardy were not far behind the brothers; but the remainder of the bicycle riders were strung out for half a mile along the dusty road.

By that time the motorcycles and the automobiles were out of sight. Even Dan and Billy could not see them, for small patches of timber here and there, as well as the general unevenness of the country between Colasha River and Barne-gat, soon hid from each other the various parties into which the club was split.

As the stragglers began to drop out, some of them stopping beside the road to rest and others actually turning back towards Riverdale, Dan said to his brother:

"This is bound to bring things to a head. At the meeting next week the Riverdale Outing Club will either vote for an entirely new management, or it will smash entirely."

"We've got the votes, Dan," said Billy, with determination. "We can beat Chance Avery and his friends. They're in the minority."

The Speedwells didn't talk much, however. They saved their breath for the work before them. And the way grew heavier and the pedaling harder the farther they got from Riverdale.

Had the whole club taken an easy pace, and traveled the pleasant highway in company, it would have been a delightful run. The afternoon was warm, but not unpleasantly so. With the motors and autos ahead, the bicyclists were not so much troubled by the dust.

But the grilling work of trying to cover the distance of thirty miles over such a hard road in three hours, took all the fun out of it. It was more like an endurance race than a pleasure run!

They came to Schuter's Hill an hour after leaving town. It was a straight stretch of road to the summit, all of five miles long. Although by no means as steep as the bank of the river, it promised such hard work to the bicyclists, that the Speedwells knew many of those remaining in the scattered rearguard would give up, here the attempt to reach Barnegat.

It was on this very hill, the brothers knew, that the motorcycles and autos would make their greatest gain over the laggards. When they reached the beginning of the rise Dan and Billy

sprang out of their saddles by common consent, and flung themselves down to rest a bit. There was a spring beside the road and a fine, wide-armed old oak shading a grassy bank.

The Speedwells were off in a minute, however, and Hardy and Fisher followed them immediately upon getting a drink. They had not rested, and were not prepared as Dan and Billy were for the long and arduous climb. Therefore, when Biff and Fisher were less than a third of the way up Schuter's Hill, the Speedwells disappeared over the top.

It was a quarter to four when they came to the first stretch of descending road. For the most part it was now all an incline to their destination. The worst of the run was over—their hardest work was behind them.

"My goodness! isn't this a relief?" cried Billy to Dan, putting his feet on the rests and beginning to coast down the small hill before them.

"I believe we will make it on time, boy," returned his brother. "Hello!" he added. "Who's that ahead?"

There was a figure at the bottom of this small hill; it was one of their fellow-members, and in a moment Billy cried:

"He's got a motor machine. One of 'em's broken down, Dan."

"You say that with considerable satisfaction; Billy," remarked Dan.

"Humph! well it does make me mad to think how easy they are getting over the road while we are pedaling away for dear life."

"And you'd be delighted to travel just as fast as they travel, Billy," Dan reminded him again. But Billy's eyes were fixed upon the chap at the foot of the hill. In a moment he gave voice to another excited exclamation.

"Don't you see who it is, Dan?" he asked, turning to his brother, who was coasting down the slope by his side.

"Why—it's——"

"Avery! Chance Avery!" sputtered Billy.

"Something's happened. Why is he away back here?"

"I don't care what has put him back," declared Billy, with vigor; "but I'm more than glad that something has gone wrong with him."

"Hush!" commanded Dan, for they were drawing near.

Very likely Billy's words had reached the captain's ear. He glanced over his shoulder, saw the Speedwells, and scowled. Dan put on the brake as he wheeled down to Avery.

"What's happened, Avery?" he asked pleasantly enough. "Can we help?"

Chance was pumping up his rear tire. The

contents of his tool-kit were scattered about and it was evident that he had suffered more than a puncture. At least, when he spoke, it was very evident that he had fractured his temper—a compound fracture at that!

“I don’t need any of *your* help,” Chance said, sourly. “You’d better plug along if you expect to get to Barnegat to-night.”

Billy flamed up at this and before Dan could reply to this ungracious rejoinder, the younger Speedwell cried:

“Let him alone, Dan! I wouldn’t help him if he had to take shank’s mare clear back to Riverdale. And I hope he does!”

“You needn’t bother. I’ll pass you before you get far beyond the railroad crossing, youngsters,” snarled the captain.

The brothers, although they had reduced speed, had not stopped. Now both put on weight and pushed up the short rise beyond the hollow.

“Did you ever see such a bear?” demanded Billy.

“He’s sore that we should be the ones to overtake him. It’s a great joke on him after the pace he set,” admitted Dan.

“I’m tickled half to death,” said the younger boy. “Hello! there’s the grade crossing.”

The Barnegat & Montrose Branch of the R. V. & D. Railroad crossed the highway at the foot of

this second steep slope which they now descended. The hill was not high, but it was precipitous and there were bad curves in the railroad line on either side of the highway. After several accidents had happened the railroad company had placed a flagman at this crossing.

His little shanty was only revealed to Dan and Billy when they were more than half way down the slope; but the man himself was not in sight. It was naturally to be inferred that no train was due at the crossing at this hour.

And not seeing the flagman, the boys would have shot past the shanty after crossing the rails had it not been for Dan's quick eye. Chance Avery was not in sight. There was a sharp turn in the highway as well as in the railroad, and if he had started down the slope he could not see the crossing until he was a few yards from it.

Dan looked around to see if Chance were coming. His view of the interior of the flagman's hut was better than Billy's. He saw the man sprawled flat upon his face upon the floor, one arm bent under him in so uncomfortable a position that it was impossible to suppose him sleeping!

"Billy! Wait!" called Dan, and stopped his own wheel and leaped off at once.

His brother heard and looked back. He saw Dan run into the little shanty. The next instant

Billy heard his brother utter a shout, and then he ran out with a flag in his hand, which he waved wildly.

Before Billy could leap off his own wheel he saw a banner of smoke above the treetops and heard the roar of an approaching train. For some reason the locomotive did not whistle nor was the bell rung. It rushed on toward the grade crossing without seemingly retarding its speed in the least.

But Dan was not flagging the train. Billy knew that well enough. From behind the wooded turn in the highway above the crossing came the "put-put-put-a-put" of Chance Avery's motorcycle. The explosions would completely drown for the rider of the machine the sound of the approaching train!

There was time for Chance to stop if he saw the flag. The train was not yet in sight; but it was doubtful if it could be stopped on signal from the crossing when its locomotive did appear.

Billy realized these facts as he ran back toward his brother. He glanced into the flagman's shanty; the man still lay there on his face—he had not moved.

CHAPTER X

THE EMPTY CLOCK CASE

THE motorcycle, Avery bending over the handle bars, shot into view. The captain of the Riverdale Club was recklessly descending the hill without putting on his brake. He could have shut off his power and coasted down the descent quite rapidly enough for safety; but he had been trying to make his threat good—he had desired to reach and pass the Speedwells.

Fortunately, however, he glanced sharply ahead as he shot around the bend in the road. He saw the flagman—Dan Speedwell was waving so frantically.

Chance shut off his power and then he heard the roar of the approaching train. He was able to stop his machine in time; indeed, he had hopped out of the saddle when the locomotive thundered down to the little flag shanty.

The engineer of the fast freight saw Dan's frantic motions with the flag and he realized that something out of the ordinary had happened. This boy in the knickerbockers and visored cap

was not an ordinary substitute for the regular flagman.

Therefore, the engineer set the air brakes. The long and heavy train ground to a stop with only half its length past the shanty. Chance Avery was blocked, with his motorcycle, on the other side of the line.

The conductor of the train and a brakeman ran forward from the caboose. Billy had already entered the hut and had turned the unfortunate flagman so that his face could be seen. He did not seem to be injured in any way; he was merely senseless.

The freight conductor stuck his head in the door and sniffed.

"That's what I thought! Poor Jimmy's intoxicated," he said. "I knew how it would be when the supervisor gave him this job. He's not fit to be a flagman. That's how he lost his job with the Darringfords, over to Riverdale, and he had a good place there."

Billy had sprung up when the conductor came in. Now he asked quickly:

"When did he work at the machine shops?"

"He got discharged two months ago. Jimmy Badger isn't a bad lot, but he has some bad habits. And he's got a wife and a half-witted son to care for, too."

Dan was already beckoning Billy out of the

shanty. He knew that the railroad men would take charge of affairs now, and he was in haste.

"Come on, Billy!" Dan muttered. "We've got a chance to beat Chance Avery to Barnegat. He can't get across the tracks with his machine till the train pulls out."

"Bully!" exclaimed Billy, and ran for his wheel.

But when they were both pedaling for dear life along the dusty road again, the younger boy turned a serious face towards Dan and asked:

"Did you hear that about the flagman having worked for the Darringfords?"

"Why—yes," said Dan.

"And that he had been discharged?"

"Sure."

"You didn't see what *I* did, when you went into that shanty," said Billy, mysteriously.

"I saw the poor fellow on the floor and the flag in the box. I grabbed the first one at hand and ran out with it," explained Dan, as they rode on.

"And when you got that flag you pulled the others out of the box," said Billy. "Or, at least, I suppose you did."

"What of it?" asked Dan, curiously.

"Look here," said the younger boy, and he took something from under his blouse. It was an object that had made an uncomfortable bunch

there since they left the railroad, but Dan had not noticed it.

"Well!" exclaimed the latter. "An alarm clock. What are you going to do; time us with that?" and Dan grinned.

"I got it out of the box the man kept his flags in."

"What do you mean?" demanded his brother, suddenly serious. "You took it without asking?"

"Sure," said Billy, doggedly.

"Why, Billy! I don't understand you," said Dan. "I never knew you to do such a thing before."

"Look at it," advised the younger boy, without betraying any confusion at his brother's tone and words.

Billy passed the article over and Dan uttered a surprised exclamation. The clock case was empty; there were no works in it.

"What—under—the—sun——?" faltered Dan.

"Remember that box I found in the fire?" said Billy, earnestly. "If that contraption set the Darringfords' office building afire, it was done with the works of just such a clock, Dan. Let's see if the works we found will fit into that case."

"For cat's sake!" ejaculated Dan. "And

this Badger man used to work at the machine shops!"

"And was discharged for bad habits," added Billy.

Dan shook his head and increased his pace. "We'll keep the case and look into it," he said, doubtfully. "But don't you say a word to anybody until we are sure."

"Of course not!" exclaimed Billy. "There goes the train now. Chance Avery can get by," and he chuckled at the happening to their captain.

They bent over their handlebars, and as rapidly as possible pumped along up the slight rise that faced them. From the top of this ridge it was all easy going into Barnegat. They could have coasted most of the way; but they were determined that the captain of the club should not get ahead of them.

In the distance now they could see the dust raised by the other motorcycles. Some of the members had doubtless slowed down to wait for Avery. The Speedwells were within two miles of the town, however, before they heard the exhaust of Chance Avery's machine behind them.

Dan pulled out his watch and announced that it was ten minutes to five.

"We're going to make the casino on time, old fellow!" cried Billy, with delight.

"And Avery is barely going to get there. He

hasn't had much more fun on this run than we chaps on bikes."

"Serves him right!" muttered Billy, as they pedaled ahead as hard as though they were on a race course.

The vanguard of the Outing Club was just arrived at Tryon's Casino, where arrangements had been made for their entertainment, when the Speedwells rode up, side by side, and at a fast clip. Chance Avery sprang off his motorcycle not half a minute behind them, and when he saw Billy's grinning and dusty face, he scowled fiercely.

At the very moment of their arrival the town clocks began to strike the hour.

"There you are, Chance!" drawled Billy, loud enough for most of the chattering club members to hear. "You were going to sound the assembly at just five and we were going to be somewhere back on the road. But your plan didn't work right, did it? It strikes me that you are the one that came near being behind schedule."

"I'd have been here in plenty of time if you and Dan hadn't played me that trick," growled Avery, raising the bugle to his lips.

Dan stepped forward quickly, but waited until the captain had sounded the call. Then the older Speedwell spoke.

"You have said something that I don't like, Avery," he said, quietly. "And you said it so that other people beside Billy and I heard you. Just explain your remark, will you? What trick did my brother or I play on you?"

"I don't take orders from you, Speedwell," snarled the captain. "I'll explain if I wish to."

"You'll wish to," said Dan, threateningly, and he looked so determined, and so fully able to back his threat with bodily punishment, in spite of the advantage of age and height which Avery possessed, that the latter grew suddenly cautious.

"You stopped me at the railroad crossing, didn't you? I was held up there for twenty minutes. You did it intentionally," cried Avery, excitedly.

"How did he do it, Chance?" asked Burton Poole, one of the older members, and one who had ridden over to Barnegat in an auto.

"Flagged me there. I thought it was the regular flagman at the crossing. When I pulled down and stopped, a train did come along. But I could have beaten it across the track all right. It was a sharp trick; he did it so that he and his brother could keep ahead of me."

"I did it to try and save you from getting in the way of the train," said Dan, sternly. "And you know that well enough. I didn't suppose the train would stop and hold you there. The

flagman was asleep and left the crossing unguarded," he explained to those who had gathered around.

"That sounds all very well!" began Avery, when Billy Speedwell broke in with:

"I can tell you one thing, Chance Avery! Whatever Dan does in the future, I'll never lift a hand to save you from injury again. He stopped you just in time, and you know it! If you had come on unwarned, that train would have hit you, and you'd not had the chance of sounding the assembly here."

The new members who had come over on bicycles did not get back to Riverdale until midnight. The Speedwell boys were even later when they put their wheels in the shed and slipped quietly into the house. Unfortunately, because of the health law, they were obliged to deliver milk to their customers on Sunday as well as every other day in the week, and Billy said it was scarcely worth while going to bed.

Their thoughtful mother had left a nice luncheon for them and Dan made coffee on the oil stove. As they sat down to eat with hearty appetites sharpened by the long run from Barnegat, Billy saw a scrap of paper by his plate. It was the childish handwriting of his sister Carrie.

"What do you think?" the note read. "Mr. Darringford has been here in his automobile in-

quiring for you and Dannie. He wants you both to call at his house before you leave town Sunday morning, after you go over your routes. He told mother you were regular heroes, just as the paper said."

CHAPTER XI

THEIR DEAREST WISH

HAD Billy and Dan wished to go to bed they could not have slept after reading those few lines their little sister had written for them. Although it was quite true that neither of the boys looked for, or desired, payment for what they had done in rescuing Robert Darringford from the fire, the mystery of the young man's call at their home while they were absent on the Barnegat run could not fail to excite them.

They changed the club uniform for their working clothes, and discussed the possibilities of Mr. Darringford's call all the time they were doing the chores, and getting ready the milk wagons for the trip to town. On Sunday mornings they were able to get around the two routes in much quicker time than on week days. They were always home in season for the late family breakfast, with plenty of time to prepare for church.

And it seemed odd that Mr. Darringford should wish them to call on Sunday morning. Nevertheless, when Dan and Billy had delivered

to the very ends of their routes they met and, in Dan's wagon, drove out to the Darringford place. Mr. Robert was unmarried and lived at home. Darringford Park was one of the show places of the county and was on the outskirts of Riverdale.

The boys left the milk wagons at the lodge, for the big gates were closed, and walked up the driveway to the mansion. It stood upon a bluff overlooking the Colasha River; and here the stream was broad, dotted by islands, and with all manner of craft plying to and fro. The view from the terraced lawn about the Darringford house was very attractive.

Early as was the hour, the boys found Mr. Robert resting in a reclining chair upon the east veranda. It was evident that he knew who his visitors were the moment he spied them, and he sent a servant to invite them to join him on the porch.

"I am heartily glad to see you, boys," he said. His face was badly disfigured; he had lost much of his hair and his mustache had been sacrificed. But he was a notably cheerful young man.

"I have read about what you did for me; but I fear that I have very little remembrance of the particulars myself. I was in bad shape when you found me, Dan."

"I reckon you'd better take that story they

had in the *Star* with a grain of salt, Mr. Darrington,” said Dan, laughing.

“I’m perfectly willing to do so. But the fact remains that you and your brother have placed me under lasting obligations.”

“If that is so—if you feel that way I can tell you right now how you’ll please Billy and me a whole lot,” interrupted Dan Speedwell, smiling.

“How’s that, young man?”

“By saying nothing more about it, Mr. Darrington. We’d been sure of your kindness if you hadn’t sent for us; we couldn’t very well get out of coming when you were so insistent. But I hope—and I know that Billy joins me in it—that you’ll say nothing more about it.”

“I can see very well that you are afraid of being rewarded for your bravery,” said Mr. Robert, gravely smiling at them. “You need have no fear. The Darringtons are offering a thousand dollars reward, the hand bill will be published to-morrow for information leading to the arrest of the person, or persons, who set fire to the shops; but my father and I could not pay you boys for your quick wit and brave actions in helping me to escape from the flames.

“I merely sent for you to tell you this. The doctors have ordered me into the woods for a few weeks and I go to-day. I don’t know when I shall return. The smoke I swallowed seems to

have injured my throat, and the medical men recommend the balsam forest.

"Meanwhile I want you to know that I am your friend and some day I hope to be able to do something for you both. No! not with money. I recognize your independence. But—between friends—isn't there something you'd like that I can help you attain?"

Mr. Robert's smile was very winning, and he hastened, before either of the brother's could reply, to add:

"I know what boys are. I am not much more than a boy myself, you remember," and he laughed. "Dad believed in letting me save my pocket money to buy some things I wanted. I know that I was two years getting enough together to buy me a boat. Now, boys, what do you want most of all? What is your dearest wish?"

Dan and Billy looked at each other, and both flushed. If Mr. Darringford had been able to read their eyes as each could read the other's, he would have seen plainly expressed in the orbs of both Dan and Billy the same desire.

"I'm not much of a fairy godmother, boys," chuckled Mr. Robert; "or, godfather, if you please. But I might be able to gratify your very dearest wish—and have no longer to wait for its accomplishment than to-morrow morning."

He was smiling at them. Both Dan and Billy were too excited to reason out the thing. They had no idea that Mr. Robert's call upon their parents had been for the express purpose of learning how he could please the brothers best without hurting their feelings. He was too warm-hearted and thoughtful a man to merely send the boys a check and consider that he had well paid them by so doing. Now he thoroughly enjoyed the confusion and excitement into which his words had thrown them.

"I have been making inquiries about you boys," he continued, "and I learn that you are each enthusiastic members of the Riverdale Outing Club. You each ride bicycles. I remember that on the Fourth of July, at the races your club held in the baseball park, Dan carried off several prizes in the straight-away races, and that Billy, here, showed himself to be something of a trick 'cyclist.

"Now, I am sure, it lies within my power to give you boys each something by which you can remember me as a friend, and which will bring you a lot of pleasure. Was there ever a boy who could ride a bicycle who didn't long for a motor machine? Now, own up, boys. Isn't it the dearest wish of each to own a motorcycle—one of our new model Flying Feathers? The Darringfords turn out the best machine in the market to-day, at

least, I believe so, and I want you both to ride them and show the fellows who have other makes just how much superior the Flying Feathers are."

"Oh, Mr. Darrington!" cried Dan.

"Have you anything to say against it, William?" demanded Mr. Robert, with mock seriousness.

"We—we can't thank you!" gasped Billy.

"Well, who asked you to?" returned the gentleman, cheerfully. "Here!" and he thrust an envelope into Dan's hand. "This is to Clausen, foreman of the shipping department. Show him that. You are each to go to the shops to-morrow morning and pick out the two machines that suit you best. I am going away to-day, as I tell you, or I would give you the benefit of my judgment in your selection; but don't be afraid to take the best in stock, and Clausen will advise you if you ask him."

"Mr. Darrington!" said Dan, seriously, "we never can thank you enough."

"That's too bad! I wouldn't try, then," and he laughed. "We understand each other, I am sure," he added, shaking hands with each of them. "When I come back from the woods I shall want to see both of you often. Good-bye, and be sure you get the two best motorcycles in the shops."

When the boys were out of the park and rat-

ting homeward in the milk wagon, Billy suddenly uttered an ejaculation.

"What do you think of that!" he shouted.

"What's the matter?" demanded his older brother.

"We never told him a thing about the masked man, and the rat-trap and alarm-clock combination! We never even told him we had a clue to the party that set the fire!"

"And we are not sure that we have a clue," said Dan, gravely.

"But that Jimmy Badger, the flagman."

"Hold on. We've no right to accuse him. We do not even know the clock case belongs to the works you found attached to the rat-trap. Keep still about it."

"But Mr. Robert's been so kind."

"That's all right. We won't forget that. But we have no right to bring suspicion upon an innocent person. Badger is in trouble enough, I reckon. He'll lose his job with the railroad company."

"He deserves to," grunted Billy.

"It seems so. But we don't know. And it is sure we do not know that he had anything to do with setting the Darringford shops afire."

Billy shook his head. "That's so," he admitted. "But did you hear what Mr. Robert said? They are going to offer a thousand dol-

lars reward for the arrest of the guilty party. Oh, Dan! what could we do with a thousand dollars?"

"I haven't stopped to think yet, Billy," said his brother, quietly. "And I guess we ought to be content with what we have. Think of it! the pick of the Darringford motorcycles!"

"There's one thing," said Billy, in conclusion, "Chance Avery won't freeze us out of any more of the club runs."

"And we'll have a chance to enter for the Compton races, Billy," agreed Dan. "They come off in two weeks, and all we could look forward to was the bicycle events. Hurrah! we're in the motorcycle class at last, boy!"

They agreed to meet after delivering the milk, and as early as possible; and next morning when their work was done, they drove to the Darringford shops. The warehouse and shipping departments had been untouched by the fire; so the stock of machines, including those of the very latest model, would be large.

Dan and Billy were stopped at the small gate in the stockade fence, but on showing the letter to Mr. Clausen were allowed to enter at once, and they reached the stockroom without any trouble. Mr. Clausen took the letter, opened, read it aloud:

"Give these two boys the opportunity of look-

ing over our stock of Flying Feathers. They are each to choose a machine—no restriction as to price or finish. Bill to me. R. Darringtonford.”

“Well!” murmured the head shipper. “That’s a pretty broad order, but it’s Mr. Robert’s handwriting. Can’t get around it,” he added, with a smile. “Come in and look the machines over, boys. You’ll excuse me, please. This is a mighty busy morning for all hands.

As he saw Dan and Billy hesitate at the railing which separating his small office from the large room where the machines stood in many rows, Mr. Clausen opened the gate and waved them to enter.

“Go to it!” he said, laughing. “Take your pick, give the number of the machines you select to the young lady sitting there at the typewriter, and trundle them out.”

He hurried away and Dan and Billy, after a minute or two, became so much interested in choosing their machines that they soon forgot all else. The Flying Feathers, although possessing in each machine the graceful lines of the Darringtonford patent, and all the improvements added that season, were finished in different styles. They ranged in prices from \$150 to \$250, the higher priced machines possessing heavily nickeled parts and complete tool-kits.

Naturally both boys did not like exactly the same machine. Billy's choice was lighter than Dan's, but both were about the last thing in motorcycles. As Mr. Clausen had instructed them, they gave the numbers stamped upon the fork of machines to the girl in the office, and then took them out into the yard. They were half way to the gate when it was opened by the man on duty and Chanceford Avery came in. He did not work at the shops; in fact, he went to the Riverdale Business College, but he was often in the place, and could come and go just about as he pleased.

The Speedwells did nothing to attract his attention, but Chance saw them the moment he turned from the man at the gate. He came swinging up the gravel path as the brothers trundled their new machines toward the gate. They would have passed the captain of the Riverdale Club with nothing more than a bow, for Chance had already favored them with an ugly scowl, when young Avery uttered an angry exclamation and sprang directly in front of Dan Speedwell.

"Say!" he ejaculated. "What are you doing with that motorcycle?"

"I guess that doesn't concern you, Avery," returned Dan, rather sharply.

"I'll show you——" began Chance, but Dan pushed on and the other had to dance back out

of the way or have the front wheel of the machine run into him.

“Stop it, I say!” yelled Avery. “Mind what you’re doing. That is my machine you’ve got there—how dare you take it out of the shops?”

CHAPTER XII

DAN AND BILLY DECIDE

CHANCEFORD AVERY'S surprising declaration halted the Speedwells in their tracks. But neither of them believed it was the truth.

"Now, just listen to him!" muttered Billy, under his breath. "Did you ever hear so foolish a way to pick a quarrel?"

Chance came nearer to the motorcycle that Dan was pushing, and stooped to examine the number plate. He was flushed and angry, and when he stood up straight again he continued in his usual haughty tone:

"I was sure I was not mistaken. I don't know by what authority you fellows are taking those machines, but I am very sure that you, Dan Speedwell, will not take that one from the shops. It's mine, I tell you."

"I don't suppose you could make a mistake, could you, Avery?" demanded Dan, with some scorn. "We got these machines out of the selling stock. This particular one I chose myself, and I propose to keep it."

"You'll do nothing of the kind!" cried Chance. "Why, how came you with money enough to buy a motorcycle, I'd like to know?" he sneered. "And that is one of the highest priced machines in the shops."

"I reckon there is no law to make me explain my private affairs to you," returned Dan. sharply. "There's enough been said. Stand out of the way; will you?"

"No, I won't! You'll not have that machine."

"Well, if I don't have it, it won't be because of your say-so!"

Dan was quite as angry as was Chance himself. Usually he kept his temper admirably under control—much better than the more impulsive Billy. But this attack seemed so uncalled-for, and foolish, that the elder Speedwell had would have been glad of the chance to try fistic conclusions with the captain of the Outing Club.

Dan only pushed the wheel ahead, however. This time Chance seized the handle-bars.

"You stop where you are! Here comes my brother. I guess we'll soon find out what this means," snarled Avery.

Superintendent Avery was coming down the yard. He had seen the three boys and he likewise realized that something was amiss. When he came nearer he evidently recognized Dan Speedwell, too.

"Well, Chance, what is it?" he asked.
"What's the trouble with that fellow now?"

"This Dan Speedwell acts as though he was crazy," declared Chance. "He's got in here by some means, and is trying to take out my wheel."

"Your wheel?" exclaimed Francis Avery.

"Yes. This one I chose Saturday morning. You remember I told you I was going to have a new wheel. It's a good deal better than my old one."

"I remember," said the superintendent. "And what has this fellow got to do with it? Hold on! is that his brother? And he has a wheel, likewise?"

"We've got a right to them," declared Billy.

"We'll come to that, young man," said the superintendent sharply. "But first of all, if that is your machine, Chance, take it away from the fellow."

Dan spoke quickly then:

"Who is to be the judge of that?" he demanded. "I claim the wheel is mine,"

"He is wrong, Frank!" cried Chance.

"And how did you come by it, Speedwell?" demanded the superintendent.

"It was given me. Both of the wheels were given us. We chose them just now from among those in the stock room."

"And who gave you permission to choose

motorcycles out of our stock, young man?" asked Francis Avery, in wonder.

"Mr. Robert Darringford."

The answer staggered both the Averys, and they looked at each other, nonplussed. Chance managed to say.

"He's crazy!"

"I don't know about that. Isn't he the fellow who appeared to know all about that old drain while the fire was burning? The boss and Robert were talking about him the other day," said the elder Avery, reflectively.

"But that's my wheel!" cried Chance, insistently.

"Oh, that'll be all right. Give my brother his machine, Speedwell, and go pick out another for yourself—if you have really been given that privilege."

But Dan was obstinate. And he believed he had good reason to be. He had chosen just the motorcycle he wanted, and he did not believe Chance Avery had previously had any idea of getting this particular wheel.

"I am going to keep this machine," he said, quietly. "Mr. Robert told us to come here and pick out the machines we wanted. We have done it."

"Well, Mr. Robert isn't at the shops to-day, and I guess if I say you can't have them you'll

wait till he comes back from his vacation before you get the cycles," said Francis Avery, with an unpleasant laugh. "So hustle them back into the stock room, boys. I am not obliged to take your unsupported word about it."

"That's the talk, Frank!" murmured his brother. "I believe they are stealing the machines, anyway."

Billy stepped forward with clenched fists at this, but Dan held him back.

"We won't make anything by fighting," the latter said. "And they won't make anything by trying to bluff us. We came here with proper authority from Mr. Robert to get the motorcycles. Ask Mr. Clausen."

"Clausen! what does he have to do with it?" demanded Frank Avery.

"He has Mr. Robert's letter," said Dan, quietly.

"What letter?"

"Mr. Robert's letter giving us permission to choose machines for ourselves," returned Dan. "Mr. Clausen has it."

At that moment the head of the shipping department appeared in the doorway. Superintendent Avery turned on him with his usual bullying manner.

"What's all this about, Clausen?" he demanded. "Did you give these fellows permis-

sion to take the machines they wanted, and wheel them away?"

"I did," drawled Clausen, seemingly quite unruffled by Avery's tone.

"Well, I want to know!" sneered the superintendent. "Since when did you think you were empowered to do such a thing?"

"Since I got Mr. Robert's letter to that effect," returned Clausen, with a slight grin.

"Let me see it!" commanded Avery, drawing nearer.

"Miss Polk," said Clausen to the girl at the typewriter; "please let me have that letter I just handed you to file."

The girl brought it. Avery put out a quick hand for it, but Clausen held it back.

"I'll read it to you, Mr. Avery," he said, significantly. "It is rather a peculiar letter—an order out of the ordinary, I mean."

The superintendent and Chance listened to the note with lowering brows. Both were evidently sorry that the Speedwell boys had the right they claimed—to choose and take away any motorcycle they fancied. But Frank Avery was not easily beaten.

"That's all right, Clausen!" he said, his face clearing up suddenly. "I only wanted to be sure. Quite out of the ordinary, as you say. I doubt if old Berry, at the gate, would have let the boys

out with the wheels without a word from me, however. But, there is just one little mistake, I find. By accident my brother left a machine that he chose on Saturday among the unsold ones in your department. This is it," and he placed his hand upon Dan's machine.

Clausen remained silent. Chance looked relieved. The superintendent continued:

"Of course, young Speedwell will have to choose another motorcycle. You have my authority to allow him to do this. You can easily change the number in your report to Mr. Robert."

Clausen did not even bow an acknowledgement of this gracious permission. He was looking at Dan Speedwell.

And Dan showed no intention of giving up the machine beside which he stood. Indeed, his hands gripped it the more firmly and his eyes sparkled. He was convinced that the Averys were merely making him the victim of a petty trick.

"I've got the machine I want right here," he said, doggedly. "I don't intend to change it."

"And I say you shall!" cried Chance.

"Go inside there, young man, and pick out another," commanded Frank Avery.

"I'll not do it," declared Dan again. "This is my motorcycle. Mr. Robert told us to come

here and take what we wished out of the stock. We found these machines in the stock room. They are brand new. I don't believe Chance ever saw this one before. And I am mighty sure he'll never ride it!"

"Why, you audacious young rascal!" exclaimed the superintendent. "Did you hear me tell you to return that machine to Clausen?"

"I beg your pardon," interrupted Clausen, and it was evident that there was no love lost between that individual and the brusque superintendent of the Darrington Machine Shops. "I can't take that motorcycle back if the boy doesn't want me to."

"What's the matter with you?" cried Frank Avery. "Have you taken leave of your senses?"

"Not that I know of. But an order is an order. I have Mr. Robert's plain instructions. I have given the Speedwell boys their choice of machines. They have chosen. They are quite right; that particular machine was picked out of the general stock. We cannot go back of that."

"I tell you Chance had chosen that machine for himself."

"Then Chance should have taken the cycle away," said Clausen, and he turned on his heel and left them. Frank Avery was too angry to fuss longer with these boys. He even left his

brother in the lurch, and strode after the impudent Clausen.

"Come on," said Dan, to Billy. "We're through here."

He looked significantly at Chance Avery as he started toward the gate again. Chance opened his lips to speak, and then thought better of it. He realized that it would not be wise to oppose the Speedwells further, unless he was ready for a personal encounter with Dan.

The brothers trundled their motorcycles down to the little wicket. The first pleasure of obtaining their valuable presents had been soured for both of them by Chance Avery. Billy said:

"That fellow seems always in the way. He puts himself out to try and bother us, I believe."

Dan spoke with more energy than usual: "And I am going to put myself out to put it beyond his power to bother us—or the club—before long. Now, you mark what I say."

"How will you do that?" asked the curious Billy.

"Never you mind. Wait and see," returned his brother, mysteriously.

The man at the gate made no objections to their taking the motorcycles outside. He remembered that they had come in with a letter directed in Mr. Robert Darringford's handwriting.

Beside the gate, as they passed out, Dan and

Billy saw a placard pasted announcing the reward for the apprehension of the party setting the shops afire. Billy pointed to it and said again:

"Just think of it, Dan! What couldn't we do with a thousand dollars?"

"I expect that even a thousand dollars has its limitations," returned his brother, smiling. "But it would be a nice sum to own."

"I should say it would. Come on, Dan. Let's go to Appleyard's and buy some gasoline. I want to get home so that we can put up the horses and try out the machines."

Dan was just as eager as was his younger brother, if the truth were known. They bought the gasoline and hurried home in the two milk wagons, each carrying his motorcycle lashed on behind. Carrie and little 'Dolph were quite as excited as were their big brothers when the machines arrived; and Mr. and Mrs. Speedwell showed all the interest that fond parents could in Dan and Billy's happiness.

The swift machines were tried out that day. The county road that passed the Speedwell's door was splendidly kept for several miles, and the boys raced over the highway for two hours on the powerful wheels.

"Two better machines aren't owned in Riverdale—or in the county. I tell you, Billy, we'll

enter for the motor events at Compton and there must be some mighty bad luck happen us if we can't win some of the races!" cried Dan.

"That's good, too," admitted Billy. "But it pleases me most to remember that there isn't a member of the club that can sneer at us now because we can't keep right up with the procession."

Dan grew suddenly grave. "There's something I want to speak about on that line, Billy. The monthly business meeting of the club is appointed for Wednesday evening."

"I know it."

"I have sounded some of the fellows. We want to get every member to come and vote. We want to put a stop, once and for all, to the bullying of the poorer members by Chance Avery and his crowd."

"Count me in. What will we do?" asked Billy, briskly.

"We have no right to plan outings, or races, or anything else, in the name of the club, that does not include those who only ride bicycles."

"I suppose not," said Billy, more slowly.

"Now, old man! think of it," advised Dan, smiling. "We're in the motorcycle class ourselves now. But remember Biff Hardy, and Garrison, and Fisher Greene, and a lot of the little fellows, and the girls. Vote for vote, the ma-

jority of the members are still merely bicycle riders."

"That's so," admitted Billy.

"Then you'll be with me," said Dan, seriously, "in my attempt to put it beyond the power of Chance, and the other thoughtless ones, to crowd those who do not ride power machines out of the club."

"You can count on me—of course," said Billy. "But how will you do it?"

"I have my plan," said Dan, mysteriously, and for the time that was all he would say.

CHAPTER XIII

CHANCE AVERY IS CHECKMATED

AMONG the young folk of Riverdale it was soon known that the Speedwell boys had been presented with Flying Feather motorcycles by young Mr. Darringford. Billy and Dan were popular with most of their chums, and there were few indeed who were envious of their good fortune.

But many of the club members who only owned bicycles expressed their belief that now Dan and Billy would care very little about how fast Chance Avery paced that club on its runs. It was naturally to be expected that, being themselves in the power machine class, the Speedwells would forget their duty to the rank and file of the Outing Club membership.

Mildred Kent, however, denied this among the girls.

"Dan Speedwell isn't that kind of a boy," the doctor's daughter said, confidently. "I am worried a good deal by the future prospects of our club; but Dan's course—or Billy's, either—

doesn't trouble me. I know they will both think of the members who are not as fortunate as they are."

The evening of the business meeting of the Riverdale Outing Club came, and, thanks to Dan's personal effort, almost every member was present. Biff Hardy and several other fellows who felt themselves to have been particularly ill-treated by "the rich fellows," as they called Chance Avery and his friends, would not have attended at all had not Dan Speedwell urged them so strongly.

"We might just as well give up our membership in the club and start a clique of our own," Hardy had declared. "After all, we haven't got the votes. I've counted noses. The girls will about all side with Avery, and some of the younger fellows, too."

"I never would give up a fight so easy," said Dan. "I am going to fight to the last ditch!"

"And you own a motorcycle yourself, too!" ejaculated Hardy.

"That's the meanest thing you ever said to me, Biff," observed Dan, smiling. "Do you think I deserve it?"

Hardy had the grace to blush. But he and his friends were very glum when the session opened as usual. Chance Avery, as president and captain, was chairman of the meeting, and it was

in his power to influence the trend of business to a considerable degree.

For instance, when Dan Speedwell got on his feet the moment new business was in order, Chance refused to see him, but looked meaningfully at Burton Poole, one of his own particular friends. Up jumped Poole and offered a resolution pointing to a plain division of the Riverdale Outing Club which should put all members riding motor wheels in one class, and their less fortunate comrades—in other words, the riders of bicycles—in another.

Among Biff and his friends there were sudden, and not altogether suppressed, exclamations of anger. Several members tried to talk at once. Avery silenced the confusion with his gavel, and then called on those only whom he knew to be in favor of the resolution, to speak upon it.

It was trickery, and it looked as though it was to succeed. If those opposed to the resolution could not get their opinions before the membership, the wavering members, or those who did not fully see the end to which such a course would bring the club, were likely to vote for the new rule. Hardy and his friends, in making a disturbance only made votes for the other side.

Dan Speedwell kept still, and he had to fairly drag Billy into his seat and threaten, in a whisper, to sit on the younger boy to keep him

there! But Dan watched eagerly for his chance. It was bound to come. He knew enough about the requirements of the case to be sure that even Chance Avery could not force through this new rule without a vote, and before that vote could be taken, and recorded, a chance must be given the opposition to speak.

Avery, however, was shrewd. He allowed anybody to speak upon the subject whom he knew was in its favor. He wore out the members who did not care. Call after call was made for "Vote! Vote!"

"It seems," said the president, smiling, and looking carefully away from the place where the Speedwells sat, "that we are all agreed. At least, a large majority are in favor of this very good rule. It will, I believe, settle all disputes. We shall practically be two clubs, working in unison. Of course, it is a mere matter of form to put it to vote; I am sure Mr. Poole's resolution will be carried almost unanimously. If there is any opposition I do not hear it——"

Dan was on his feet. "Mr. President!" he cried, quickly.

Avery refused to look in his direction. "The resolution is seconded and sufficient time has been wasted already in its discussion. All those in favor——"

"Mr. President!" exclaimed Dan again.

"Order! order!" ejaculated several of the president's friends.

"That is what I rise to—a point of order," Dan said, quite unruffled.

"Oh, sit down, Speedwell!" sneered Avery. "We don't want to listen to you."

"You will listen, nevertheless, Mr. President," said Dan, firmly, and refusing to be baited to anger.

"I call you to order!" snapped the president.

"And I am not to be brow-beaten, Mr. President," returned Dan, carefully. "I demand the opportunity of presenting a resolution of my own to the club."

"Out of order!" declared Avery, with a bang of the gavel.

"Not so. New business was asked for. Mr. Poole opened the discussion with his proposal. The resolution I have to offer is upon the same subject. I warn you, Mr. President, that if you persist in giving those opposed to you no opportunity of expressing their opinion, they will vote down Mr. Poole's resolution."

"Let it come to a vote, then!" cried one of Avery's friends.

"Fair play!" shouted another member. "We've heard everything in favor of the splitting up of the club into two factions. Give those opposed a chance."

"There *is* no opposition but that of these Speedwells," sneered Chance.

Suddenly Mildred Kent arose. She was naturally a diffident girl, and the effort of speaking before a roomful brought a vivid flush to her cheek. But Mildred possessed the true kind of courage.

"I would be glad, as one, to speak against the resolution, if I am in order?" she said.

Chance Avery was obliged to do the right thing at last, and in doing it he must give Dan the floor.

"You are out of order, Miss Kent," he said. Then he scowled at Dan. "Speedwell has the floor."

Dam smiled gratefully at the doctor's daughter. He knew that she had deliberately done this to help him; Mildred had been shrewd enough about parliamentary proceedings to help Dan get the president into a trap. The way was clear then for Dan to put the argument for the opposition before the meeting. And he did it in a really masterly manner.

"I believe," he said, in the course of his remarks, "that I am quite able to put fairly, the case of our comrades who only ride bicycles. I have recently acquired a power machine myself—and am glad of it. But I do not forget that the Riverdale Outing Club was primarily a bicycle

club, that its first members still ride the wheel, and that their subscriptions make a large portion of our building fund which, in the end, we hope to invest in a permanent clubhouse."

Before Dan ceased talking Chance Avery himself knew that it was foolish to ask for a vote upon Poole's resolution. He looked significantly at Burton, and that young man withdrew it. Instantly Dan offered a set of resolutions in place of the other. They were drawn by one of the young lawyers of the town, and were correctly worded, and so plain that their meaning could not be mistaken.

The arbitrary power of the captain and president was nullified in regard to all arrangements for club runs. An executive committee of five was to have charge in future, of such outings, and the rule was established that the captain should pace the members at a speed not to exceed eight miles an hour on any run longer than ten miles.

Dan and his friends had matters well in hand by this time. The set of resolutions went through by a safe majority and then other matters—particularly the coming Compton races—were discussed.

It was agreed, before the meeting broke up, that the club, as a whole, should attend the Compton race, and that they should ride the distance on bicycles or motorcycles. In getting this

rule through, Dan shut out the motor car business. Automobiles were completely out of place in a run of a wheeling club, and all with good sense admitted this fact. Besides, governed by the new set of rules, there would be no need of the weaker members staying out of the runs unless they could go in autos. Compton was only twenty miles, and the club would be given two hours and a half to make the motordrome from the Riverdale Court House.

As they left the main thoroughfare of Riverdale behind them this evening on their homeward journey, Dan and Billy took a narrow and badly lighted street, which bisected that part of the town in the midst of a poor neighborhood and entered the country road on which the Speedwell house stood.

Half way along this lane the boys were startled by a sudden cry ahead of them, a shrill cry, which made them both shut off their engines, and check their machines.

It was repeated for a second time, and it was unmistakably a cry of pain; but whether uttered by man or woman neither Dan nor Billy could have told.

"What do you suppose that means?" gasped Billy, leaping from the saddle.

"Hush! it's right ahead," declared his brother.

Dan, too, had dismounted. They left their machines leaning against a large tree beside the road, and went hastily forward. A struggle was going on ahead, and the cry was repeated for a third time.

Strongly moved by the sound, the Speedwell boys approached. The moon, suddenly appearing from a cloud, shone down upon the scene. There were two figures visible in the moonlight; a heavy, burly man and the slighter form of a youth. As Dan and Billy distinguished them the man struck at his companion, staggering in his attempt to reach him, and the youth cried out again.

CHAPTER XIV

THE BADGERS

DAN, who never could bear to see any person or creature abused, sprang forward quickly and seized the man by the arm. The youth who had cried out escaped to the other side of the lane.

The man's face was illumined by the moonlight. Billy Speedwell uttered a cry of surprise.

"That's Badger, the flagman! Don't you remember, Dannie?"

The man, wavering on his feet, turned to glare at Billy.

"You—you're wrong, boy," he stammered. "I'm no flagman. I've lost my job. Put out!"

Instead of making good his escape the youth, whom the Speedwells had come to rescue, approached.

Instead of showing fear of the man, the young fellow came close to him and catching the man by the coatsleeve, made a scolding sound, and gestured as though he were angry with the brothers for interfering.

"The poor creature is dumb!" ejaculated Dan, first to understand the mystery.

The youth—he might have been twenty—was a thin, unhealthy-looking person, his hair like flax, a down on cheek and chin, and watery blue eyes that held in them very little intelligence. Dan remembered what the freight conductor had said when they found Jimmy Badger in the flag station on Saturday. This, then, was the unfortunate man's afflicted offspring. And the son was dumb.

Seeing that the latter wished to get Badger, who had fallen down, upon his feet again, Dan and Billy helped him up. He wavered a moment, and then plunged after the dumb boy. The latter eluded him and kept just in advance, uttering the same painful cry. It seemed like a game they were playing, the dumb youth keeping just out of the man's reach, but always urging him on.

"What do you know about that!" whispered Billy in Dan's ear.

"Isn't it terrible?" returned Dan.

"What shall we do? Can we help them?"

"Come on! We'll trail along behind and see that nothing happens to them," advised the older Speedwell. "I reckon they are going home."

The boys picked up their motorcycles and pursued the man and his companion up the lane. Just before they reached the broader highway the boy darted in at a gate. The moonlight and

a feeble, flickering lantern on a post, showed the Speedwells that the cottage beyond the gate was dilapidated.

The dumb lad ran up the steps and pounded on the door. Jimmy Badger went after him. The door opened and lamplight streamed out, revealing a woman standing in the entry.

The dumb boy darted by her, and the man tumbled up the steps in pursuit. Billy was still afraid that the man had serious intentions of beating the unfortunate youth, and he stepped quickly into the yard. The woman saw him.

"What do you wish?" she asked him, and her voice was very sad.

"Is—is the young fellow safe?" stammered Billy.

"Rick is all right," she said, firmly.

Dan had followed his brother into the yard. She looked from one boy to the other. She spoke again, softly, in the manner of one who had known advantages and education in a past time:

"Do not be afraid for him. It is a way Rick has of getting him home. Although the poor boy is dumb he is very shrewd in some things. We—we have just come here to live to-day, and I suppose the neighbors will think us very strange until they—they become familiar with our peculiarities."

Dan felt a sudden choking in his throat. The pity of it cut him to the heart. But he hastened to say:

"We're not exactly neighbors of yours, Mrs. Badger; but if we can do anything for you let us know. Our name is Speedwell; we live out on that road yonder, about a mile."

"I know," said the woman, nodding. "Thank you. You can do nothing."

The man, who it appeared was subject to fits of rage, then scrambled inside. The woman closed the door, and the boys mounted their wheels, starting off for home again without a word to each other.

But when they had arrived at the Speedwell place, and were putting their machines into the shed, Billy said:

"I'm mighty sorry for that woman—and the dumb boy. Isn't it terrible, Dan?"

"All of that," returned his brother, gravely.

"And do you suppose that Jimmy Badger really set fire to the machine shops?"

"Hush, Billy! we haven't any right to even whisper such a suspicion," declared Dan, warningly.

Later in the day, long after both boys had returned from the milk routes, Billy had occasion to go into the shop back of the barn, and there found his brother deeply engaged at the bench

under the window. Dan did not even hear Billy's footstep until the younger boy was right behind him.

"Well! did you ever," ejaculated Billy, looking over Dan's shoulder as the latter turned around.

Dan was engaged in examining the half-burned box and its contents that Billy had discovered under the bell-tower of the destroyed building at the Darringford plant. Beside the box was the empty clock case that Billy had likewise discovered—under the flags in the little hut at the crossing of the Barnegat & Montrose Railroad branch.

"Old man," Dan said, gravely, "do you remember what Biff Hardy told us the night of the fire?"

"Goodness me! I was so excited that night that I don't remember that Biff told us anything," said Billy.

"He did. Biff said that he was at supper when the fire started. He said it was an explosion started it—he heard it."

"Well?"

"If that is so, this contraption here," and Dan tapped the half-burned box containing the clock-works and the trap, "did not start the fire. This is no bomb, and any explosion would have torn the thing to pieces."

"Right!" ejaculated Billy. "I never thought of that."

"But," said Dan, with continued gravity, "the fire might really have been burning some time before there was an explosion."

"How's that?"

"The fire might have been started by this arrangement and then burned along to something—a can of naphtha, or the like, which exploded and scattered the flames."

"And have you figured out how the fire could have been started by that rat-trap and the clock?"

"I have," returned Dan, much to his brother's amazement.

"My goodness, Dan! You don't mean it?"

"I do mean it. I have been studying the problem a good bit, and I have made some experiments. In fact, Billy," added Dan, slowly, "I have succeeded in starting another fire by these same means," and he pointed to the paraphernalia before him on the workbench.

CHAUTER XV

AN EXPERIMENT

BILLY SPEEDWELL was at once deeply interested in what his brother said and in what he had been doing with the strange contrivance that had so puzzled them. Beside, in Billy's imaginative mind the possibility of explaining the fire mystery, catching the incendiary, and winning the reward of a thousand dollars offered by the Darringfords, was by no means a hopeless task.

Dan had evidently, in odd hours, studied over the rat-trap and clock-work combination to good purpose. The works of the clock were in fair condition and ran smoothly. It was evident that the wire connecting the alarm-striker with the trigger of the trap was an almost perfect arrangement. Without the index face of the clock to show him what he was about, it was rather difficult for Dan to set the mechanism just right; but finally he had accomplished it.

When the trigger of the trap was released the little door (of tin) snapped shut. The lower edge of this door was as sharp as a knife blade. Dan had discovered this to be a fact and dis-

played a cut finger as the result of his experiment.

Now, while Billy watched him breathlessly, the older boy laid half a dozen parlor matches in a row so that the heads were directly beneath the door of the trap. He arranged skillfully about the opening of the trap some oil-soaked shavings.

"You see," he observed to his brother; "it is my opinion that the party that made this contraption filled the wooden box with litter and waste, well packed down, so that the trap and clock could not be shaken apart in transportation. Now watch."

Billy was not likely to lose anything that went on. Dan set his clock-work and started it. They heard it ticking faintly, and both boys sat down to watch results.

The clock would run but ten minutes before the wire tautened and pulled the trigger. Dan had arranged it so. Yet the time which elapsed seemed interminable to Billy.

He watched, his eyes on the contrivance which they both believed had set the fire in the Darringford shops. Whoever the person had been with the mask and the rat-trap, whom they had seen the night the Riverdale Club went to Upton Falls, the Speedwells were sure that that stranger was connected with the conflagration.

The cage trap had surely been used to accomplish the criminal design, but the fellow had

not been able to use it singly. The boys believed the Unknown had first tried to work it without the clock-work attachment, and without this box.

And Billy had not seen just how the apparatus worked yet. But he was soon to understand it. The wire tautened and the trap snapped. The sharp tin was driven against the heads of the parlor matches. There followed a sputtering report, and the flames sprang up. The shavings were ignited and burned furiously until Dan, looking at his brother significantly, brushed the rubbish to the floor, and carefully trampled out the fire.

"Now, boy," the elder brother said, "you see how it was done. The fire burned its way out of the box quickly. The incendiary had placed the contrivance near a naphtha tank, or something of the kind. The tank blew up and that was the first announcement anybody had of the fire."

"You are right, Dannie," cried Billy. "We've got the clue, and all those detectives never worked it out!"

"Not so strange, when we consider that everybody believes that a time-bomb, or something of the kind, was the first cause of the fire. The police did not look for such an ingenious, yet simple, arrangement as this."

"And the works of the clock, Dan," said Billy, eagerly. "Do you suppose they came out of that case I found in the flag shanty?"

Dan took the empty case in his hand and turned it over slowly. It almost seemed as though he shrank from answering his brother's eager question.

"What's the matter with you, Dan?" cried Billy. "Is there any way to settle that point?"

"Whether the clock works and the clock case belong together?"

"Yes,"

"In this case there happens to be a pretty sure way of settling the point," declared Dan, seriously. "This alarm clock was not new, but it was a good make. The firm that made it stamped a number on the case as well as upon the works. The numbers are the same, Billy. I believe there is no doubt of it. The case and the works belong together."

"And Jimmy Badger is the guilty man!" cried Billy.

"I—don't—know."

"Oh, Dan! what do you mean? Isn't it plain?"

"Nothing is plain," declared Dan, with sudden energy. "I've gone farther, Billy. I've made other inquiries about the Badgers. According to all reports Jimmy Badger, the unfortunate man, would never have had ingenuity enough to rig such a contrivance. He is most illiterate, and his habits have affected him sadly. He never was

very bright, by all accounts. This thing," and Dan nodded to the box, "shows more than a little inventive ability."

"Well, that gets me!" cried Billy. "How did the case come in his shanty, then?"

"I don't know."

"And he had been discharged from the shops, too."

"True. But, Billy, suspicion isn't proof, nor is circumstantial evidence, even, to be always trusted. This is a serious accusation to bring against the man."

"But what will you do?" burst out his brother. "You don't mean to let the matter drop? You won't keep it to yourself?"

"No. I can't hide facts that may lead to the clearing up of the mystery. I am convinced a crime was committed."

"Then what?" urged the excited Billy.

"I feel that we should inform the Darringfords of our discoveries—up to a certain point, at least," said Dan, thoughtfully.

"Well! that will settle Badger's case, then."

"No. I advise that we merely hand over this contrivance to the Darringfords, tell them where you found it, and report what we have found it was rigged for."

"Not tell them about the clock case, or Badger?"

"That's what I mean, Billy. I don't mean to compound a felony; but let us wait first and see what Mr. Robert says about this thing," and he nodded toward the clock and rat-trap."

"But Mr. Robert isn't at home."

"I know it."

"Will you tell the old gentleman?"

"No. He depends a good deal on Francis Avery's judgment. You very well know what would be said to us if we took this thing to Avery."

"I can guess," returned Billy, nodding. "He would pooh-pooh the whole thing."

"If not worse."

"How's that?"

"He might suggest that we had rigged it ourselves."

"Humph! And that would be like him for sure."

"So," said Dan, still thoughtfully, "I think we had better write to Mr. Robert."

"Come on!" exclaimed the energetic younger boy, turning a somersault with such energy that he nearly upset his brother. "Let's do it at once."

Billy still had his mind fixed on the thousand dollar reward! He said nothing to his brother about that phase of the matter, but he gave Dan no peace until the letter was written and dispatched to the shops. Of course it would be for-

warded to Mr. Robert in the woods, with his other mail.

However, the Speedwell boys now had something to take up their attention which was, in their opinion, of much more importance than the fire at the Darringford plant, and whether or not Jimmy Badger set it. The day of the Compton Motorcycle Races at the Motordrome was drawing near, and in all their spare hours Dan and Billy were speeding their machines on the hard country road which ran by their home.

Chance Avery was to ride a new Flying Feather and he was considered to be the official representative of the Darringford shops. He was an experienced rider, had plenty of confidence in himself, and although strictly an amateur, had entered for all the races from which he could not be barred.

Few of the other Riverdale riders, save the Speedwells, cared to enter for the prizes; in fact, Avery, Dan and Billy were the only members of the Outing Club that rode machines well enough to make any showing in any motor event.

Fisher Greene and Jim Handyside were going to try for the mile and a half bicycle race, while Burton Poole was to try out his father's new racing automobile. These events were the ones in which the club members were mainly interested; but on the day in question almost the full roster

of the association appeared at the Court House in the Riverdale square, in season for the run to Compton.

Dan and Billy went at once to the shed devoted to those who proposed to participate in the races, opened their tool-kits, and oiled and polished every important part. The two Flying Feathers looked every whit as new and shiny as Chance Avery's machine.

That latter young man had scowled on Dan when he entered the shed; it was plain that Chance really had set his heart upon the very motorcycle that the older Speedwell picked out, and Chance could not forget how he had been bested in the argument at the shops.

When the warning gong sounded at a quarter before the starting of the two mile race for amateurs, both Dan and Billy were in fine fettle. They were among the first to wheel their machines down to the wire. There were fifteen entries, for this was a popular race. Its length offered an opportunity for amateurs to make a record; but when the Speedwells saw some of their opponents in this race, Billy whispered to Dan:

"Gracious, Dan! what chance have we got? There's a fellow with whiskers! Besides Chance Avery and Monroe Stevens, there isn't a fellow in this crowd under twenty-one."

"Age isn't everything—especially in a motor-cycle race," returned his brother. "Keep a stiff upper lip, Billy-boy!" And he punched him playfully in the ribs.

"Aw! Quit it!" cried Billy. "Want to give me heart failure?"

The four participants in this race wearing the Riverdale colors were really the youngest of the fifteen, and they all rode Flying Feathers. Frank Avery came to look them over before the start, and after whispering certain instructions to his brother, he put a hand on Monroe's shoulder, saying:

"If Chance don't win for us, I look for you to bring the Darringford colors in, Stevens."

"Thank you, sir," said Monroe, flushing with pleasure.

The superintendent of the machine shops turned away without even noticing the Speedwell boys; yet in all the local races participated in by the Riverdale Club both Dan and Billy had won over Monroe Stevens!

"Never you mind, Dan," whispered Billy. "You can beat Monroe easy, and I believe you'll get the best of Chance Avery, too."

"Are you ready?" shouted the starter, with the pistol in his hand.

The course was wide enough for the fifteen to start abreast. They got into line, each man held

in his saddle by a helper. The starter looked down the scratch to see that all was in order.

He raised the pistol and put his other hand on the lever which raised the wire. The time-keeper nodded and——

“Bang!”

The fifteen racing machines shot away along the oval. The “put-put-put-a-put” of their exhausts soon sounded like a ragged fire of musketry. A cloud of smoke and dust was whipped from the track and trailed behind the flying motorcycles.

For the first few rods the racers were well bunched. The track was half a mile in length; therefore four laps made the race. All were saving of speed on that first lap, for most of the participants were strangers to the course.

But suddenly one shot ahead—one length, two lengths, three lengths! Others tried to creep up. Dan and Billy glanced at one another as they came along in the ruck of the racers. It was Chance Avery who had spurred thus early in the game.

The Speedwells had decided before the race just what they would do. Their team work had been noted in former races, and commented on. Both could not win the same race; there was no rivalry, or jealousy, between Dan and Billy. One “fed” the other when it was possible and in this race it was soon evident to the younger lad that

Dan had a better chance to be among the leaders than himself.

Dan's machine was working perfectly. Billy, without fouling any of the others, swung in behind his brother and yelled an encouraging word to him.

They darted on around the course and passed the post for the first time in a whirlwind of smoke and dust. Avery was still ahead, but there were several others at his saddle, and pushing him close. Monroe Stevens had already dropped to the rear; there was no hope for him.

Half way around the second time one of the candidates for the honors of the race met with an accident that, for a moment or two, made the spectators hold their breaths. He blew a front tire and had a spill that came marvelously near being a tragic one.

When the tire burst, with an explosion heard to the farthest seat of the grandstand, the rider was catapulted through the air for several yards, and over the inside rail of the course.

He landed, sprawling like a huge frog, upon a small tent erected in the field, and although he went through the canvas, it broke his fall so that he was not seriously hurt. He sprang up almost at once and waved his hand to the crowd, that they might know he was safe, and a cheer went up from all over the place.

The incident lasted a few seconds only, however. The broken motorcycle was dragged off the track before any other rider was upon it, and the fourteen remaining racers whirled around the course faster than before.

Dan was creeping up on the leaders. Billy, pounding away behind him, could see that his brother was in a fair way to be numbered among the first at the finish.

Being so far in the forefront of the race now, both Dan and Billy could see their opponents ahead. Before they were three times around the course Chance Avery was beaten. That was plain.

Two of the other riders shot ahead of him and, the next moment Dan Speedwell was beside him. Billy still trailed his brother, and the two whirled by Chance without his even recognizing them.

There was only three riders ahead of Dan then; two were side by side and the other hugged the rail, hoping to shoot past the leaders by a fluke. But Dan saw that this hope was futile. The two in the lead rode Red Rangers and they were deliberately keeping side by side so as to hold the others back. One intended making a sprint when the tape was in sight and so win out!

Both Dan and Billy realized that this was the scheme of their rivals, and they likewise knew that only a few seconds remained in which to try and set the trick at naught.

CHAPTER XVI

FIGHTING TO WIN

NOT a word passed between the two brothers. Indeed, their voices could not have been heard above the confusion. But when Dan pulled out to the right Billy understood immediately what the older Speedwell was about.

Billy spurred himself and gained place directly behind the third rider from the front, while Dan bore steadily to the fore beside this rider.

Inch by inch Dan crept up on him. His front wheel passed the other's rear wheel, then passed the saddle. In a few seconds he was abreast of his rival.

Somebody started a cheer for Dan Speedwell. Dan heard it, and the encouragement determined him to go farther. Just ahead were the two leaders, riding side by side. Dan pulled out farther, making his own course around the oval the longer; but it was his only chance to get past the Red Rangers.

And then suddenly a totally unlooked for accident occurred, an accident that promised to put

Dan Speedwell immediately out of the race. He was already creeping up on the leaders when he felt a stab of pain in his left leg.

It was no injury the hurt of which was momentary only. An increasing burning sensation along the leg almost made Dan scream aloud. But he continued to coax his powerful Flying Feather ahead.

He knew in a second what had happened. The exhaust of his machine had set his legging afire. The fire, smouldering for a few moments, had reached the flesh. And the flesh along the side of his leg was being scorched while he rode!

But Dan Speedwell raced on. Not for a second did he lose his head, or do anything that would retard his machine.

The legging smoked, and the smouldering fire grew, but all the time his Flying Feather crept ahead. They were in the stretch. Dan was at the saddle of the outside man. The pair of Red Rangers broke and one tried to spurt ahead.

Indeed, for a flash, he did take the lead. Dan Speedwell saw a stretch of daylight between the rear wheel of the first Red Ranger and the front wheel of the other, and into that breach he shot his Flying Feather!

The crowd in the grandstand saw it all. With a howl of delight they sprang to their feet. Dan, carrying the Riverdale and the Darringford

colors, slipped in ahead of the other Red Ranger, got the rail, and passed the leading motorcycle within the last ten yards of the tape.

A wheel ahead—that was all; but it was enough! The roar that went up from the spectators almost deafened Dan. And, now it was over, the boy threw himself from his motor, rolled under the rail, and lay in agony on the grass. He had put out the fire, but his leg, for a strip six inches long, was blistered.

In the riders' shed the Riverdale boys crowded around the winner of the first race. But neither of the Averys said a word to Dan. Frank Avery had disappeared; but Chance was doing some talking.

"He's got a better machine than I—that's what's the matter," he growled. "It's my motorcycle, anyway. I had it picked out; but these muckers are all alike. He got around Robert Darrington in some way, and begged a machine, and took this one——"

"Yah!" broke in Biff Hardy, with disgust. "But if Dan hadn't known how to ride better than you, Avery, he would not have won that race."

"Is that so?" snarled the captain of the Riverdale Outing Club. "The machine is all the difference, let me tell you."

"It's the fellow who rides the machine that

makes the difference," returned Hardy, with confidence. "Some little thing happened to your motorcycle and you fell back and lost the race. But Dan would have stayed with it if he'd been burned to a cinder! That is what won the race!"

Meanwhile Billy was attending Dan, and refused even to look at the second and third race. But Dan was easier then. Besides, the girls came down from the grandstand to see him between races, and they all urged Billy to go out and let them remain with his brother.

"You're an awfully brave boy, Dan," said Mildred Kent; "but we must depend on Billy to make a showing for the Riverdales in the Gudgeon Handicap. You were both entered for it, weren't you?"

"Yes," said Dan. "Billy's got to make good alone in it."

"Eleven miles!" gasped the younger boy. "And Mr. Gudgeon only gives us two laps."

"Go over your machine, Billy," commanded Dan. "Be sure everything is all right with it. Nobody will expect you to beat a professional like Gudgeon, even when he gives you a mile of the eleven. Remember, though, you've only got ten miles to travel to his eleven; try and be among the first three."

"And do, *do* beat that Chance Avery!" ejacu-

lated Lettie Parker. "He's just as mean as he can be. He says Dan didn't win that race fair, anyway."

They all laughed at that, but Billy nodded to his brother.

"I'll do my best, old man," he said, and went off at once to overhaul his motorcycle.

The amateur bicycle races were on and Biff Hardy and Fisher Greene both made good for the Riverdales. Then the whole squad of Riverdale boys squatted on the grass inside the rail, as the gong called to the scratch the candidates for the handicap.

Billy Speedwell rolled his machine down to the starting post and was covered with confusion when the crowd gave him a noisy welcome. They recognized him not only as a plucky fighter in the first race, and the brother of the fellow who had won, but in this handicap Billy was by far the youngest rider entered.

Mr. Gudgeon, the Western professional, shook hands with him and wished him luck; but some of the others smiled slightly at the idea of such a boy trying in the race. Chance Avery turned his back on Billy and muttered something to the man next him that made that fellow laugh.

There was a big field in this race—twenty-three motorcyclists—and it was some time before they got into line. Billy began to get nervous. The

noise and confusion was enough to "rattle" a much older rider than he.

He saw Chance Avery down near the rail. Trust the captain of the Riverdales for getting on the inside of the field and thus cutting off a few yards of the first lap, at least. The leaders would go to the rail, of course, before the first mile had been run.

"Ready!" shouted the starter.

Every rider settled himself into the saddle, held up by the helper. With their feet braced upon the pedals they were ready to start at the crack of the pistol.

Billy experienced a delicious thrill, and he smiled. The blood pumped in his ears, but he was suddenly cool. The race was on—the time of inaction was past. Billy Speedwell was in full control of himself, now that they were about to get under way.

CHAPTER XVII

DOING HIS VERY BEST

“READY!”

The starter's voice was clearly heard this time. A hush had fallen over the field and over the grandstand. The pistol cracked the next instant. Billy felt himself and his motorcycle flung forward by the strong arm of the man who had held him.

They were off!

The boy pedaled furiously for a moment and started his engine. “Put-put-put-a-put! Put-put-put-a-put!” the exhaust of his own Flying Feather drowned the sound of the other twenty-two engines in his own ears. All he realized for the first few seconds was that he was moving over the track, gaining speed at every breath, with the wind rushing by him.

To his surprise Billy saw the way pretty clearly before him. He seemed to be in the van—most of the other riders were behind him ere they had half rounded the oval the first time. And then the boy realized that the figure directly in front

of him, and hugging the inside rail, was Gudgeon, the professional.

"He's holding back," thought Billy. "I seem to be about the only fellow pushing him, and yet he is a whole mile behind the field."

Now, bicycle racing and motorcycle racing are two different sports. In the amateur class Billy had made good for three years and more on his wheel. He had learned how to save his best efforts for the final stretch—the rush to the end of the race that means so much!

Here, in riding the motor machine, it was not his legs and back that were going to win for him. It was judgment that counted.

To the novice it might seem that motor racing is more luck than anything else; that skill and endurance are in second and third place to luck.

But this is not a fact. The skillful way in which the rider handles his motorcycle is everything in a race. He is not actually put under such a physical strain as in bicycle racing; but much nevertheless depends upon a keen eye, a clear brain and a sure hand.

And then the engine—in that lies the nub of a motorcycle race. Billy and Dan had tried out their machines during the ten days before this race, every way possible. The boy knew his engine ran perfectly, smoothly, and he had, only a few minutes before getting into the race, gone

over every important part of the motorcycle he then bestrode.

The boy knew well enough that Gudgeon must have a wonderful machine, and that he was a perfectly fearless rider. When Gudgeon "let himself out" young Speedwell expected to be left behind like a cripple trying to race with a locomotive!

But until that time came Billy proposed to stick as close as he could to Gudgeon. The first mile was covered shortly, and although the riders were strung out some, none were far behind. But Billy suddenly saw that there were two or three who had darted ahead of Gudgeon at the first and had managed to hold their places.

Now, however, the professional increased his pace and crept up on these leaders—steadily, surely, and seemingly without effort.

But Billy realized that he was traveling faster than he had at any time during the two mile race. It seemed as though he was already coaxing about the highest speed possible out of the Flying Feather.

On and on flew Gudgeon, and Billy kept his course directly behind him. The professional bore out to pass a rider ahead, and Billy tailed along in his wake. To the utter astonishment of this rider, who had made such a spurt early in the race as to bring him ahead of the professional,

not only Gudgeon's machine, but that of a second racer flashed past him!

Billy heard the crowd cheering; he realized that to some degree the commendation was for him. He determined to hang to Gudgeon's trail.

They had whirled around the oval four times before the professional pulled out for another rider. Billy saw that it was Chance Avery. The machine ridden by the captain of the Riverdale club was working perfectly and Gudgeon had no easy time passing Chance.

But Avery glanced around and saw Billy Speedwell coming, too. Gudgeon forged ahead and Billy's head wheel was almost at Avery's saddle, when the latter turned his own wheel to the right. In this way he lost something of the advantage he had gained when he took the inside rail; but he was forcing Billy farther out into the track.

Billy swerved a little and Gudgeon took the rail ahead of Chance. The latter still forced Billy to the right. Billy believed he could have kept in the professional's wake had not Avery followed the course he did. Nor did Chance gain anything himself by his manœuvre. Another rider coming up behind took the rail.

Billy's spurt had come to an inglorious end. He saw Gudgeon sweeping ahead around the track, eating up yard after yard, passing first one and then another of the foremost riders. Billy

tried to pass Chance; it was no use; the fellow kept his lead of a wheel's length and still held the younger boy outside.

The younger Speedwell knew that Chance was doing this purposely—that the captain cared more about interfering with his clubmate than in capturing the race. And certainly Avery would do all in his power to keep Billy from winning.

This discovery soon roused Billy Speedwell's anger; and with the wave of rage he felt came a determination to beat Chance himself, whether he passed anybody else in that great race, or not.

He knew his Flying Feather was not doing all it could in the line of speed; yet the pace now was a perilous one. If his wheel swerved, or if Chance ran in an inch or two closer, there might be a spill in which both, or one of them, would be badly hurt.

Urged by the sting of anger, however, Billy threw caution to the winds! He was bent on beating Chance Avery, and he remembered little else during the next few moments. He increased the speed of his Flying Feather to the very last notch. The machine leaped ahead as though shot out of a catapult.

The few inches by which Chance led him were wiped out so suddenly that the older rider could not respond. Had he swerved to the right again

he would have fouled Billy in plain view of the judges.

Young Speedwell dashed ahead. Within a single lap he left Chance well in his rear. But he was fully aware that there were but two more miles to ride—four laps.

Gudgeon had long since disappeared in the distance. There were but two riders ahead of the boy that he could see. The professional, of course, had regained most of the mile that he had given as a handicap. Billy knew that Gudgeon had passed him once, and he believed he was then very close to him on his second lap.

The boy hadn't time to glance around. Indeed, he did not dare to do so. He was traveling at a terrific pace. He could only glare through his goggles and hold on to the handlebars grimly.

If the wheels of the motorcycle skidded, or if they chanced to hit any small obstruction, Billy knew that he would scarcely have a chance. He remembered how the participant in the first race had been flung by the burst tire and he knew that he was going much faster now than was that man at the time of the accident.

His spurt of speed continued. He passed one of the two remaining leaders in the race. He was hard on the heels of the other when he was aware of another motorcycle that was creeping up on him.

Chance had come back! That was his first thought. The captain of the Riverdale Club was making a final effort to win over Billy Speedwell.

The latter was determined not to lose to the fellow who had treated both his brother and himself so meanly. He was willing to take chances to best Avery.

Before him was the actual leader of the procession. Billy brought his machine beside this one, urged it on, passed him and suddenly darted to the left and took the rail!

The crowd roared its approval. There were two laps more—a single mile.

On, and on, and on he flew. But the machine he feared kept close behind him. He knew it was there, although he could not see it.

Half a lap more—the stretch was in sight; still Billy's machine shot around the course with the other sticking to him like an Old Man of the Sea!

A full lap finished—no change. Billy was flying for dear life while the other machine was but a length behind.

The boy had forgotten all about Gudgeon and his handicap. He believed Chance Avery his only rival—and that was Chance behind!

Then half of the last lap was done. Billy rounded the end of the oval into the stretch, and the crowd roared. Were they calling him on? What was the cry that was raised?

"Gudgeon! Gudgeon! Oh, you Gudgeon!"

The other machine was creeping up on him. Billy knew it; he realized that in sight of the tape he was being beaten.

His rival pulled up even with him. Billy's eyes were blinded by tears that made them smart. He only knew that the other machine forged ahead ever so little and then——

The crowd was on its feet. They cheered like mad. Billy and his rival were past the tape and the boy knew that he was beaten.

But when he fell off his motorcycle, rather than dismounted, it was Gudgeon, the professional, who caught him in his arms. And the bewildered boy heard the famous rider say:

"I beat him by half a length—and as pretty a race for those last two laps as ever I entered. Young man, I'm proud to have won from you! You're all right!"

CHAPTER XVIII

BILLY AND RICK BADGER

THE Flying Feather machine had won a race—one of the most popular, indeed, at Compton that day. But Frank Avery never came near either Dan Speedwell, who had won the two-mile race, or Billy, whose showing in the handicap gained such favorable comment from the committee of management as well as from the crowd.

Dan was taken home in an automobile, for he could not ride so far on his motorcycle with his injured leg. However, that did not cripple him for long. He had the pleasure of setting the handsome silver cup he had won upon the parlor mantel; but he heard no word from the Darringford shops. Usually the manufacturer of a machine that won a good race sent at least a letter of appreciation to the rider. And the superintendent of the Darringford Machine Shops had been in the motordrome when the race was won.

Billy worried over this neglect; but Dan only smiled.

“What does it matter?” queried the older

brother. "The Averys can't take away the cup—nor deny the fact that I won it."

"But Chance is saying that you won on a foul."

"And the committee of judges say I won fairly—praised me, in fact, for sticking in the race when my legging caught fire. What do we care about Chance Avery?"

Although Dan had written a long letter to Robert Darringford, relating the finding of the clock and trap arrangement which he and Billy believed had caused the fire at the machine shops—and had likewise, in the same epistle, told the gentleman how much he and Billy liked their motorcycles—no reply had been received from the hunting camp in which Mr. Robert was taking his vacation.

Nevertheless Billy Speedwell did not forget the mystery, and perhaps his brother bore it in mind quite as steadily, although he did not chatter about it as much as did Billy.

For this reason, perhaps, Billy kept a watchful eye upon the Badgers. Jimmy Badger was working faithfully now. His wife insisted upon paying for the milk Billy left each morning. Rick, the dumb boy, had taken a great fancy to the younger Speedwell, and often rode about Billy's route with him.

Rick could make some sounds, but they were not pleasant to listen to; therefore he preferred

to make his desires known by signs. His mother had laboriously taught him the deaf and dumb alphabet; but he made up many arbitrary signs himself that were easily understood by those who were willing to give the afflicted youth the least attention. And he could read the lips of those with whom he frequently associated.

One day Billy was in town on his motorcycle and went around by the Badger cottage. Rick ran out and stopped him. The mute made signs and showed excitement which Billy, quick as he usually was at understanding Rick, could not make out.

Mrs. Badger, watching from the doorway, said to the visitor:

"He wants to show you something he has made. He is very eager that you shall see it first even before his father. It works, you see——"

Rick was jumping up and down and clapping his hands. He was evidently very much delighted.

"He has always been very ingenious," said his mother, sadly. "A natural mechanic, they say. All lost because he is unlike other boys. Nobody would trust him with tools. But he has a little workshop of his own."

Billy went back to the shed in the rear of the cottage led by the dumb boy. Although Rick

was twenty years old, and taller and bigger than Dan, Billy always looked upon him as a child.

Between this shed and the house proper was a porch, and on the porch was a sink into which the water from the town was piped. Billy had rigged a home-made water wheel in this sink and five minutes after turning the spigot, the little contrivance had engendered power enough to run Mrs. Badger's sewing machine, just inside the kitchen door.

Rick was so delighted over the invention that he could only dance about and applaud himself for a time. Then he took Billy into the "workshop" to show him other mechanical contrivances he had rigged—most of them perfectly useless things, but all showing an inventive genius.

Suddenly Billy pounced upon something in a dark corner and drew it forth. It was a wooden starch box with a sliding cover. Rick uttered a cry which showed that he objected to what Billy was doing; but the latter had recognized the box as similar to the one he had found half burned under the Darringford bell-tower.

Before Rick could stop him, Billy pushed back the cover. There was no waste or shavings in the box, nor was there the works of a alarm clock. But the remainder of the dangerous contrivance like that which Billy was sure had set

the fire at Darringfords, was in the box—the rat-trap!

Rick grabbed it out of his hands, shut the cover, and pushed it back into the corner. He shook his head and dragged his visitor away from the place. Young Speedwell had, however, seen enough!

He felt sorry for Rick, the dumb boy. And he was puzzled to understand how Rick should have invented such an arrangement as that that had set the fire at the Darringford plant. Jimmy Badger, out of a feeling of hatred because he had lost his job, must have secured his son's invention and used it in his purpose.

Billy was quite broken up over it. In fact, he felt so badly, and was so sorry for Rick, that he did not even tell Dan about this new discovery. At least he did not tell him at the time.

A few days later they received a letter—or, Dan did—from the Darringford Company. It was a brief note, dictated by Francis Avery, and read:

“I am instructed to inform you that Mr. R. Darringford is in receipt of your communication of the 17th inst., and thanks you for the same. You will hear from him on his return, and any other information you may gain will be gratefully received.”

CHAPTER XIX

THE JAUNT TO KARNAC LAKE

JIM STETSON and his sister Ruth started it. Their uncle had a summer cottage at Karnac Lake, which was some fifty miles from Riverdale, and in the heart of the Great Woods which covered the best part of two counties in the upper part of the state. Indeed, Colasha River flowed through Karnac Lake—the latter body of water being merely a widening of the beautiful river some twenty miles in length, and half as wide in its broadest part.

The Stetsons both rode motorcycles. They were jolly, companionable young folk, and they liked a good time and wished to give their young friends the same. Karnac was too far away for the bicycling members of the Riverdale Outing Club to wheel to; nor could the Stetsons offer the accommodations of their uncle's cottage to the whole club.

They therefore invited just the members—both girls and boys—who rode motorcycles, and they included the Speedwell brothers in the party.

Jim liked Dan and Billy, and Ruth wanted Mildred Kent to go and feared that, if the Speedwells were not invited, the doctor's daughter would refuse.

Some of the motorcycle riders could not accept the invitation—it was to run up on Friday morning and return Saturday evening; but twenty of them assembled at the Stetson house at the hour named, ready to make the run—twelve of the boys and eight girls.

It promised at the outset to be a delightful day, and Dan and Billy found only one drawback to the whole affair when they joined the other eighteen members of the party, ready for the start. Chance Avery was going.

"We'll have a sweet time with him along," grunted Billy in his brother's ear. "He'll want to boss the whole shebang."

"Pshaw!" returned Dan. "Don't let him spoil our fun. Don't give him that satisfaction. Jim says his sister invited him and he didn't know anything about it until Chance showed up as large as life, and twice as natural, this morning."

Dan and Billy naturally rode along beside Mildred Kent and Lettie Parker at the beginning of the run; but Chance was not afraid of being considered "the crowd." From the other side of Mildred's machine he broke into the conversa-

tion—or, rather, ignored what Dan was saying and started a topic of his own.

Mildred was polite and kind. It was seldom that she was ever angered sufficiently to show it. The Speedwell boys had always been her friends and she liked them; but she could not drive Chance Avery away.

Nor would Dan have objected if the fellow had not been insufferably impudent. Avery's sneering manner of speaking to and of Dan cut the latter to the quick. He soon was frozen out of the conversation. He could not trust himself to speak.

So he dropped back with some of the boys. Billy who was right behind with Lettie, whispered to his brother:

"Why didn't you knock him off his wheel?"

But Dan shook his head and said nothing. An open quarrel would spoil the enjoyment of the innocent members of the party. Dan determined to keep out of Avery's way, and if giving up Mildred's society would make matters pleasanter for all hands, Dan was willing to make the sacrifice.

The highway had climbed to a plateau which bordered the marsh, and they could see over the tree tops below to the open river. The hill sloped away easily on the right to the low ground and at one very pretty place they stopped for a

drink of spring water and to look over their machines.

They were all eager to get on, and the halt was not for long. Jim and his sister soon mounted their wheels and the others trailed on behind them. All but Chance and Mildred.

It was down grade from the place where the party had rested, and they all coasted, with the power shut off. Therefore those ahead did not hear Chance and Mildred when they started, and did not realize how far the couple were behind.

There were no houses upon the road along here; just the thick wood bounded by a high hedge and a wire fence on the left. It was late enough in the season, and the weather had been dry enough, for many of the trees to have begun the shedding of their foliage. A thick carpet of fallen leaves lay upon one side of the road where the light wind had swept them. Mildred carefully coasted down the other side, where the way was clear.

To tell the truth the doctor's daughter was mildly angry because Chance Avery had delayed her. He had deliberately made it appear that she preferred his company to that of the rest of the crowd, and she was determined to overtake her friends as quickly as possible.

The road was winding and the bordering trees hid the leaders from view. In fact, they were

all out of sight the next minute and Mildred and Chance were left on the lonely road together.

Chance tried to bring his wheel beside hers. To do this he turned out into the winrow of leaves. Both machines were going very rapidly now, and there was a sharp turn ahead, with a great pile of leaves in a hollow by the side of the road.

Mildred, to tell the truth, did not even look at her companion. She was only observant of the guidance of her own motorcycle.

"I say, Miss Kent! don't go so fast," Chance called. "We'll get there soon enough."

Even then she did not turn around to look at him, but only said:

"I wish to overtake the others, Mr. Avery."

Chance scowled. He knew very well that Mildred would have treated the Speedwell boys quite differently. Her machine traveled faster on the clear road than his did in the leaves, and he recklessly started his engine. The sharp reports of the exhaust had scarcely begun when his front wheel struck the great heap of leaves in the hollow.

The wheel skidded and Chance lost his balance. With a shout he felt himself going over, and the motorcycle threw him in most approved bronco style, while it ran headfirst into a tree beside the road!

Mildred saw the spill before she reached the turn in the road. She braked instantly and hopped off her wheel.

Chance was slowly picking himself up. He had fortunately fallen on the mattress of leaves. But he had a long cut on his forehead which was bleeding a little.

"Now, see that!" he exclaimed, angrily. "I bet my machine is smashed. If you hadn't gone so fast——"

He was inclined to blame her for his overturn. Mildred bit her lip to keep back a sharp retort. Chance grumblingly set about picking up his wheel and examining it.

The overturn and collision with the tree had certainly done the motorcycle no good. But before they could really learn how badly it was damaged there was a furious crashing in the bushes across the road.

Mildred and Chance both looked around. They saw a break in the hedge and in the fence. Through this opening appeared a huge pair of antlers, with fiery eyes beneath and the great forefront of a bull elk from a nearby game preserve owned by a hunting club.

The creature did not hesitate for an instant, and he evidently saw the two across the road. He charged out of the timber and came directly toward them, head down, blowing loudly through

his nostrils, and having all the terrifying appearance of a savage beast.

Mildred screamed and was, for an instant, held by terror to the spot. But Chance Avery did have some little self-possession. There was a big boulder with a sloping side a few yards down the hill. Avery seized the girl's hand and ran with her to this rock.

"Oh! let's get on our machines and ride away from the beast!" screamed Mildred.

"My motor's broke, and we can't get away," declared Chance selfishly.

That he might have put the girl on her own wheel and sent her flying down the hill never seemed to have entered his mind. They scrambled upon the huge rock and cowered there as the mad elk rushed down toward them.

The creature tried his best to leap upon the rock; but he could not do it. So he ran around and around them, bellowing frightfully, and stopping now and then to paw the earth and tear the roots with his strong antlers.

The road beside which they were held prisoners was lonely indeed. The motoring party had passed nobody for miles. Chance and Mildred might be held here by the infuriated elk for hours.

This fact was plain to Chance Avery. He began to worry about it. The refuge on the rock

was uncomfortable, and Mildred began to cry.

"You mustn't give up hope, Mildred," he said. "Nothing can harm us up here. Some of the keepers are bound to come before long. They will find the break in the fence."

"That is an old break," declared the girl, who was observant. "The beast has been out of bounds before. And I believe he hasn't given up hope of climbing up here."

"Nonsense!"

She became angry with him for saying that, and turned her back upon him. Avery saw that he would have to do something in the heroic line to appease her. Besides, he was really frightened of what the elk might do in time.

The beast was then cropping bushes a few yards down the hill, but keeping a watch upon his captives. Chance plucked up courage sufficiently to make a move.

"You keep up here on the highest point of the rock," he commanded Mildred. "Let the beast see you all the time and that will keep him quiet."

"What do you intend doing?" asked Mildred.

"I'll get to your machine and run for help. It's the only thing we can do. I'll have some of them back here shortly."

Before she could say anything in objection to this plan, Chance was creeping down the boulder on the side away from the elk. The creature was

not suspicious. Chance reached the ground and wormed his way softly up the hill to the road.

But when he reached the winrow of dead leaves his feet rustled them, and the elk galloped up the hill to see what was going on. With a yell Chance made for Mildred's motorcycle. He raised it, got on, and started down the hill while the bull elk pounded after him at a furious gait!

CHAPTER XX

DAN TO THE RESCUE

MEANWHILE the other members of the motor-ing party had begun to wonder what had occasioned the delay to Chance Avery and Mildred Kent. They had reached the bottom of the long hill and were nearing the summer colony on the shore of Karnac Lake.

The great marsh lay behind them, and the road was now leading them directly toward the river. Looking back up the descent, Jim Stetson first descried the flying motorcycle bearing the wildly excited Avery on their trail.

"Hold on!" yelled Stetson. "Something's happened. Where's Mildred?"

The party turned to look at the oncoming machine, and in a few moments all had stopped and dismounted. Dan Speedwell had turned his wheel and was ready to get into the saddle when Chance stopped abruptly beside them.

The frightened youth told them briefly—and not altogether clearly—of the attack of the big elk. The beast had not followed him far, but

had gone back (so Chance supposed) to the big rock on which Mildred Kent was perched.

"You coward! You left her alone!" shouted Billy Speedwell.

"I have come for help," declared Avery, trying to excuse his course.

"On Milly's wheel!" cried Lettie Parker.

"Where is your own?"

"Broken," said Chance, doggedly.

"We'll have to go on to the nearest farmhouse to get men and guns. That is the only thing to do," said Jim Stetson.

But, even as he spoke, Dan's motor began to pop. He had mounted unnoticed and was pedaling on the back track as fast he could.

"What are you going to do?" yelled Stetson.

Dan did not notice the cry. He shot up the hill as rapidly as Chance had come down it!

"Let's all go!" cried Billy, mounting his own machine.

"Don't you go, Bill!" cried Stetson. "Dan will be hurt. I tell you one of those bull elks killed a man last year. We have got to have help, and the girls must be taken on to uncle's house at once. We don't know how far that beast will travel, now that he is loose."

But Dan was too far away to hear any of this. He did not know what means had been proposed for saving Mildred Kent. He only knew that

she was in danger and he was determined to go to her rescue.

The motorcycle carried him up the hill at top speed. He came around the curve, right where the bull elk had burst through the boundary fence of the game preserve, and beheld Chance Avery's battered machine lying beside the road.

This was the place! Dan shut off his power and leaped from the saddle. He saw the big boulder down the hillside, he had noticed it when he passed on the run down the hill.

But there was no girl on the rock. Nor was any bellowing, pawing elk in sight!

Dan uttered a shout and waited for an answer, but heard only the echo of his own voice. The boy advanced anxiously, but with extreme caution. As he started down the hill he saw an oak limb lying on the ground—a limb about the size of his own wrist. He seized it, drew his pocketknife, and cut off the twigs and so possessed himself of a stout club.

He went all around the rock, and he saw plainly the torn turf and uprooted bushes. But the elk had so trampled the ground that the lad did not know in which direction the beast had gone. Nor could he see a footprint which pointed to Mildred's escape from the place.

Dan was not only amazed, but puzzled. The elk had gone away, and so had Mildred. Was it

possible that the girl had leaped down from the rock and run through the wood, with the animal in pursuit?

Certainly she had not gone back to the road. Dan would have seen her there. Nor could she be very near, or his shout would have brought an answer. Surely she would have recognized Dan's voice.

"Suppose she is hurt! Suppose she is killed!" murmured the boy.

Troubled exceedingly, he went farther down the hill. The underbrush became thick and although it was broad day up above, down here in the thicket the light was quite subdued.

But there was enough for him to make a single discovery—and an important one. He had chanced upon the place where somebody had broken through the brush.

Not the elk; no such large creature as that. Some twigs were broken and bushes bent down. That was all he saw at first.

Then Dan Speedwell sprang forward with a half-smothered cry, a bit of brown cloth was caught upon a thorn-bush, and the cloth had likewise a button attached to it. That triangular piece of cloth and the button had been torn from Mildred's sleeve. He could not be mistaken in that.

"I'm on her trail!" thought Dan, and plunged

on down the glade. In ten minutes he reached the edge of the marsh. He expected to find her at every step, but although he saw other broken bushes, he observed no more signs of his friend.

He stopped on the low ground and shouted again. His cry was unanswered.

He shouted again and again. He struggled from side to side. Sometimes he walked on firm ground for a few yards, then he slipped into the morass again and went sliding and scrambling about until he was thickly covered with mud and slime.

Back again turned Dan. He was nearing the solid ground and the ascent of the hill, when he heard voices on a little hummock at the right. He sprang forward, pushed through a fringe of bushes, and suddenly came upon a strange sight—four roughly dressed men sprawling around the dead ashes of a fire!

Dan had just time enough to see that they were foreign looking men and not at all pleasant customers. He was likewise troubled by the fact that they must have heard him shouting and argued that their own silence was suspicious.

Then a fifth man leaped out of the clump of brush beside him, and struck the boy a blow with his clenched fist on the side of his head. Dan went down, and for several minutes was unconscious.

When Dan struggled back to consciousness he became first aware of voices. One voice spoke angrily in broken English. Another, rough and uncouth, but evidently possessing English as a mother tongue, answered in such phrases as the recovering boy understood:

"Well! I wasn't going to let the lad get away like the girl did! She led me a nice chase—and all you fellers did was to lay here and leave it to me."

"We don't wish to get into more trouble," declared the foreign-sounding voice. "We tell you so. We call you back. You will have your own way—eh?"

"Well, I know this boy. He and another youngster chased me away that night at Riverdale when we first planned the fireworks. You remember?"

"Hush!" warned the other speaker. "He awakes."

Dan was aware of an ugly, bewhiskered face glaring close into his own. He moaned and closed his eyes wearily as though he were not yet half aroused.

"You came near to keel the boy with your great fists, Signor Paul," said the foreign sounding voice.

The bewhiskered man muttered at the speaker. Dan lay still. He was confused, but he had

drawn several quick conclusions from the few words he had overheard.

These men were hiding here in the swamp. They were acquainted with Riverdale. The one man had spoke of knowing him, Dan Speedwell! And, more important still at that moment, they had seen Mildred in her flight and one of the five had chased the girl.

That was why Mildred had disappeared. Running from the elk, she had been even more frightened by these men lurking in the swamp. And now what had become of her?

CHAPTER XXI

LOST IN THE SWAMP

"SURE, are you, Signor, that he is one of the boys?"

"I'm sure. I'd know the young scamp anywhere. He carried the lamp and so I could see his face, although he was not the nearest to me. Oh, yes! I know him," growled the bearded man.

"Well! You say, yourself, you were not to be known so easily?"

"Sure, I had a bit of rag over my face. But then——"

"You fear for naught, Signor Paul," said the foreign man—evidently the only one of the four who used English with fluency.

"I dunno. And, I s'pose, I wouldn't never knowed of that drain if the other kid hadn't fallen into the hole. I found me way inside the shops then."

"Hush! Not so particular in your speech."

"Aw—well," grunted he with the beard, uglily.

"This is not the other one?" asked the foreigner. "Not the one from whom you got the

shrewd contrivance which made what you call our fireworks? Not *him*, Signor Paul?"

"Naw! I should say not. There's nothin' the matter with this feller's head—'nless it's the crack I jest give him. But that other—Huh! *he's* batty."

"Batty?" queried the man. "What *is* that 'batty'?"

"Bats in his belfry. Crazy. Off his base," said the bearded man.

Dan Speedwell had heard all this; but, to tell the truth, at the moment it interested him but little. Later, however, he remembered all he had heard.

At this time, however, he was carefully working his body nearer the bushes that surrounded the hummock of land. While the fellows talked he was doing his very best to get away from them.

Mildred was lost in the swamp. This man had frightened her and chased her deeper into the dangerous wilderness lying between this spot and the river.

The men were fortunately deeply engaged in their conversation. Even the bearded fellow lost sight of Dan Speedwell. And, within the next five minutes, as softly as a snake wriggling its course through the grass and bushes, the boy slipped off the hummock, arose to his feet, and crept away into the undergrowth!

Dan had started this time at a different angle from the edge of the swamp where he had entered and chanced upon an old timber road made of logs and now overgrown with vegetation. But it offered a more secure footing and, by good fortune, within a few rods he found a trace of poor Mildred.

A brown hair-ribbon, that could belong to nobody else, was caught upon the twigs of a high bush. Dan pushed on with more confidence. Mildred would surely not leave this better track, once having found it.

The rough men who had frightened her after the mad elk had given her such a chase, were between her and the highway. Dan hoped that she would not turn aside and so become entangled in the swamp.

The way was rough enough at best. He could frequently see the marks of her passage through the undergrowth. He traveled for nearly an hour after leaving the camp of the five men before discovering any sign of the lost girl, besides those trampled bushes.

Then he heard suddenly a crashing in the brush ahead, a scream of terror, followed by a sound which Dan could not identify. Had the bull elk followed Mildred into the swamp and again attacked her?

This thought was momentary only, however;

Dan knew better. There had been no marks of the elk on this corduroy road, and he knew very well that such a huge and heavy animal would sink, and become fast in the morass, if it had plunged recklessly into it.

Dan uttered a shout and dashed on. He again heard the scream, while the strange, snorting sound continued. In half a minute he came to a small opening, and to the scene of trouble.

First he had a glimpse of Mildred in her torn frock, and without her cap, dodging about a clump of saplings; but it was no huge elk in swift pursuit of the imperiled girl!

A black beast with a bristling ridge of stiff hair upon its back, and with clashing tusks was charging at the saplings. As Dan dashed into the opening, with the oak club still clenched in his hand, Mildred screamed again and darted out at the other side of the clump of young trees.

"Hold on, Milly! I'm coming!" shouted Dan.

"Dan!" she shrieked, and ran toward him, stumbling and sobbing as she came.

The wild boar wheeled like a flash, and came after her. Dan knew what the creature was. Several years before the gun club had imported a herd from Germany's Black Forest; and they were dangerous beasts to encounter.

Like the bull elk this creature had found the

break in the boundary fence of the game preserve; and like the elk, too, he was as ugly as a tiger and quite as wild.

"Oh, Dan! Dan!" sobbed Mildred. "Save me!"

Dan Speedwell jumped in front of the girl as she sank to her knees, and gave the wild boar a blow on the head. It was a blow that almost stunned the brute. But he was as quick on his short, sturdy legs as a rabbit. He sprang aside, and rushed at them from another angle. But Dan was right there! Crack! went the stout club again, and the boar was beaten back.

His head was hard, however, and the third time the boy struck at him the club chanced to fall upon the beast's tusk; the blow jarred Dan's arm to his shoulder.

"Run back, Mildred!" he commanded, without looking around at her. "Quick! Before he charges again!"

Whether the girl did as she was told, or not, Dan did not see. His full attention had to be given to the beast in front. The boar slewed around once more, and charged full at the boy standing sturdily before him with the club raised to strike.

Dan's mind was active. He had seen that he might club the beast on the head a long time without doing it much harm. It would tire the lad

out first. Therefore it was up to him to change his tactics.

Dan jumped to one side as the beast came on. It was only then that he saw Mildred had not obeyed him. The frightened girl was still crouching on the ground, and in leaping to one side Dan had opened the way for the wild boar to charge upon her!

The fact terrified Dan. The girl, kneeling there with her face hidden and her form shaken by sobs, might in a moment be trampled under the sharp hoofs and torn by the tusks of the beast.

Dan was frightened; but he kept himself in hand. Having darted aside from the brute's charge was not merely for the purpose of escaping the jaws of the boar himself. His club descended, swiftly driven with all his strength.

It crashed upon the boar directly behind his head. The blow landed upon its spinal column and its direction was true. The beast sank under the stroke and rolled over, kicking, and clashing its tusks in the mire.

Whether Dan had broken its back or not, his subsequent blows disabled the beast utterly. He pounded it until the quivering body lay still and he knew that life was extinct. Then he turned to the almost fainting girl upon the ground behind him, and drew her tenderly to her feet.

"Dan! Dan!" she murmured. "You saved

me. Oh! what should I have done if you hadn't come?"

"I saved myself, I reckon, too," returned her friend.

"Oh, I have been so frightened!" she went on, still trembling.

"You haven't got anything on me there," returned Dan, whimsically. "I was some scared myself."

"That terrible deer that chased Chance Avery and me—it was bad enough. When the beast followed Chance I thought it was good time to get down off the rock and run," explained Mildred.

"And the beast chased *you*?"

"But not for far. A man came out of the woods and threw a club at the elk. But the man looked so bad that I was afraid of him, too, and I ran on."

"Just as well that you did, perhaps," muttered Dan.

"And I dared not go back. And I was afraid to leave this old road——"

"Quite right, Milly. And now, if you can travel," said the still anxious Dan, "we will keep right on following this road. I believe it will bring us to the river. It will be possible to follow the river up stream as far as the lake, I am sure."

Dan spoke with inspiring confidence; but he saw

that the afternoon was waning, knew that dusk would soon drop upon them here in the heavily timbered swamp, and secretly doubted if they would be able to go far before night overtook them.

CHAPTER XXII

BILLY TO THE RESCUE

THE party of motorcyclists, very much startled by the news Chance Avery had brought, and by Dan Speedwell's hasty departure, was quickly divided.

Jim Stetson started at racing speed for the house of a farmer on a branch road. Chance had recovered his usual calm, and he suggested going on with the girls toward Lake Karnac. Billy and the remaining boys started up the hill after Dan.

Even the impetuous younger Speedwell knew that to put themselves in the way of the mad elk without possessing a weapon to use against the beast, would be foolishness. And yet Billy did not wonder at Dan's reckless act.

He knew how his older brother felt about Mildred Kent. Dan had been her protector all through their school days. He would feel himself responsible for Mildred's safety—indeed, the doctor seldom allowed his daughter to go on a jaunt like this unless the Speedwell boys were along.

The boys with Billy were willing and anxious to go ahead and fight the big elk with sticks and stones, if necessary; but young Speedwell knew that he ought not to lead them into danger. So he held them back until the farmer and his sons, armed with guns, overtook them riding behind a pair of fast horses. Jim Stetson came on behind with his motor machine.

With the party of rescue thus fortified, Billy led the way around the turn in the steep road. They were in sight of the boulder. Neither Mildred nor Dan was there.

Where Dan had plunged down the hillside, however, he had left a plain trail. Billy found the bit of cloth also and the button torn from Mildred's sleeve.

"Come on!" he shouted. "This way!"

The boys, as well as the farmer and his sons, followed him closely. The excited lad led them directly to the edge of the swamp. By chance he struck the old corduroy road, and it was plain that somebody had recently followed this path.

As the party advanced there was a sudden burst of voices in front and a group of men appeared among the trees.

"There's them tramps, boys!" cried the farmer. "If we don't do nothing more we can drive them away. Our cornfield and poultry house have suffered enough from 'em."

The men—there were five of them—evidently desired to escape. But the sight of the guns, and the command of the farmer to "Halt!" brought the party to a stop.

The farmer and his sons strode up to them and searched their pockets for weapons. The bearded man carried a pistol, which one of the captors appropriated. This fellow stared intently at Billy.

"I know you!" he growled. "You got in my way once before."

Billy was puzzled. He did not remember ever having seen the man. Just then the young fellow who was searching the tramp's pocket, pulled out a wrinkled piece of brown cambric. It had eye-holes in it and was fashioned like a mask. Billy Speedwell uttered a cry of surprise.

"What's the matter?" asked Burton Poole.

"I know him now!" said Billy. "Do you suppose they've hurt Dan or Mildred?"

"I don't believe so," returned the farmer. "I am going to march them back to the road and send them on their way. They've been hanging around this neighborhood plenty long enough."

Billy would have tried to think up some excuse for holding at least the bearded man prisoner; but he was so anxious about his brother and Mildred Kent that he could not give much attention

to the tramp now. However, later he decided to inquire about the evil looking fellow.

The cambric mask connected the man, in Billy's mind, with the fellow he and Dan had seen lurking about the rear of the Darringford shops before the fire.

The anxious boys continued the search for Dan and Mildred. They saw nothing of the elk that had caused the whole trouble; but they found the place where Dan had killed the wild boar.

"That hunting club is a nuisance," declared the farmer. "Sometimes their deer break out and do much damage in our cornfields. And what can we do? It's against the law to shoot the critters, and we can't get any satisfaction by suing the club. But I guess after this they'll get rid of such dangerous beasts as elk and wild pigs!"

Billy was worried. He believed Dan had overtaken Mildred and he wondered that they had not returned toward the side of the marsh from which they had started. He did not know, of course, that Mildred and Dan had both been attacked by the tramps.

The trail of the lost ones was plain, and the farmer said that the old corduroy road led directly to the river. It was nearly dark, however, when the party reached the stream.

Ere this some of the boys had gone back to start toward Karnac Lake with the motorcycles,

and by the road. On the edge of the river Billy found fresh traces of Dan and Mildred, and it was plain the two had started to walk up the shore of the stream toward the lake.

The rescue party hurried on, Billy calling occasionally, and finally they were answered by a shout from Dan. In a few moments they overtook him and Mildred. The latter was quite exhausted, but she had recovered from her fears, and the boys all thought her a pretty brave girl. They arrived at the Stetson cottage in time for supper, and that meal was a very joyful occasion indeed. Everybody wanted to talk at once.

They were all so glad that Mildred had not really been injured, and that Dan, too, was safe, that Chance Avery's part in the affair was overlooked. And Chance kept very much in the background, for him, during the stay of the Riverdale young folk at the lake.

In bed that night Dan and Billy compared notes in whispers. Billy had something to tell his brother about the bearded tramp, and his tale reminded the older Speedwell of the conversation he had overheard between the men in their camp.

"I believe that I've suspected the wrong party, then," said Billy, finally.

"You mean young Rick Badger?"

"No. I mean his father. I don't know but it all begins with Rick," sighed Billy.

Then he told his brother of the discovery of a half-finished contrivance like that which had set the machine shops on fire, in the dumb boy's workshop.

"Rick's not to be held accountable, I suppose," said Billy. "But he's sure to get into trouble if the Darringfords know as much as we know."

"I am afraid that we ought not keep it to ourselves," said Dan.

"But think of the poor foolish fellow—and his mother!"

"But think of the thousand dollars reward, Billy!"

"I don't care," exclaimed Billy, gruffly. "I don't want a thousand dollars bad enough to get Rick Badger into trouble. And especially when I don't believe he is criminally guilty of any wrong."

"But it looks as though he invented that machine that started the fire."

"And somebody else put it to that bad use—and not his father," declared Billy, warmly.

"All right, Billy," said Dan, cheerfully. "I guess you have come around to the right way of thinking. We'll be careful about getting any innocent person into trouble. It is only our duty to tell Mr. Robert Darringford anything that we are sure about—to give him any clue that may help him to find those who set the fire."

CHAPTER XXIII

THE SHUTTLE OF SUSPICION

THAT very Saturday, when the Speedwell boys returned from Karnac Lake with their young friends, they found waiting for them a note from the Darringford shops. Mr. Robert had come back from the woods and Dan and Billy were asked to call at the office Monday.

Mr. Robert evidently remembered that the boys had to carry their milk around early in the morning, and so set the hour as late as nine o'clock. That morning Rick Badger climbed into the wagon with Billy when the latter came to his house, and rode around the remainder of the route with him.

Billy was delayed by several customers, and had no more than time to get to the shops at nine o'clock after delivering his last bottle of milk. So he drove directly there and without explaining to Rick where he was going.

When he pulled up before the small wicket gate (a part of the shipping warehouse was being used temporarily as offices) the dumb boy looked some-

what distressed. By his motions Billy saw that Rick wanted to know why he had come here.

By this time Billy had become quite proficient in reading the finger alphabet, as well as Rick's arbitrary signs. He said in reply:

"You see, Dan and I know something about how the fire was started here, and Mr. Darrington wants us to tell him about it."

The dumb boy shrank back into his seat, and his face paled. Billy, more disturbed than he would have been willing to confess, hesitated. He saw that Rick Badger was frightened. Should he probe deeper and try to learn what the poor fellow really knew about the mystery of the conflagration?

"You stay here and wait for me," said Billy, kindly. "I won't be inside there long."

Rick shook his head energetically.

"Won't stay?"

Another shake, and the dumb boy prepared to climb out of the milk wagon.

"Why not?"

Billy's question was answered very plainly by the mute. He disliked Darrington's shops. He was afraid of the place.

"Why?" asked the curious Billy.

The dumb boy hesitated. Finally he said he did not like the place because his father had lost his job there. He showed Billy on his fingers that

he had been very happy while Mr. Badger worked for the Darringfords. He had never been so happy since. He had been allowed inside the shops then, and had seen all the machinery, and watched the men at work. And then, one day, he had been put out.

"Who put you out?" asked Billy, deeply interested.

Rick explained that it was the superintendent, Francis Avery. And then, because Mr. Badger had objected to the rough way in which the superintendent had used the dumb boy, the father had lost his position.

Billy looked at the mute in some surprise. If this was true, Badger's unfortunate habits had not brought him to disgrace at the shops. He had been unjustly discharged. All the more reason if Jimmy Badger had wished to be revenged on the Darringfords!

Yet, there was the bearded man with the mask, and there was the rat-trap and clock-work contrivance, which last Billy was confident was the invention of the half-foolish mute.

He was deeply puzzled. But he could remain here no longer at the time. He tried, however, to encourage Rick to wait for him outside the shops.

No. Rick would not stay. He leaped out of the wagon and hurried away, while Billy entered the

Darringford premises. The younger Speedwell was very much disturbed.

Dan was there before him, having walked out from the village. As the brothers sat in the ante-room waiting, Francis Avery passed through the place. And tagging behind him was Chance. The latter scowled at the Speedwells; but the superintendent did not even glance in their direction.

At that moment the errand boy came out and told them Robert Darringford would see them. When the Speedwells entered the inner office they found both the superintendent and Chance in the room. Again the elder Avery did not notice them, while Chance continued to scowl. But Mr. Robert welcomed Dan and Billy kindly.

"Come and shake hands, boys," he said. "I was glad to hear you liked your Flying Feathers; and particularly glad to learn that you did well with them last month in the Compton races. I intend to offer a special prize for riders of Flying Feathers at the races which will be held at our ball park this day two weeks. Have you heard about it?"

"No, sir!" exclaimed Dan and Billy, in a breath.

"Well, that's not strange. It has only just been decided on. It will be a manufacturers' race solely and although some professionals will ride

in it, the better to show off the powers of the various machines, there will be a chance for amateurs to display their mettle. I hope both you Speedwells will be among the winners."

"Thank you, Mr. Darringford," said Dan, and he and Billy sat down.

Mr. Robert turned from them, and his face became grave. He looked searchingly at Mr. Avery as he said:

"We will now take up more serious business. I am sorry to say that the nature of the business troubles me not a little. These boys, Mr. Avery, should hear what you said to me on Saturday morning. We would best discuss it all right here."

"You are determined to follow this course, are you, Mr. Robert?" demanded the superintendent, sharply.

"I am."

"Against my advice? Remember I was warned by the detectives to wait a while before speaking of their discoveries."

"Suspicion is a blight that soon destroys the fairest fruit," declared Mr. Robert, gravely. "You have managed to make me suspicious, Mr. Avery. We must have the matter out."

Dan and Billy looked at each other, wondering what was coming. Chance was grinning in a most unpleasant way. Francis Avery began, brusklly:

"You insist on my speaking. Very well. I have borne in mind the wild and improbable story that these boys wrote you, and I have added to it a perfectly ridiculous yarn that the older Speedwell brought to our offices before the fire. I believed *that* to be untrue. I know positively that the story in the letter was a falsehood, too."

Dan sprang to his feet and Billy's cheeks flamed red.

"Wait!" commanded Mr. Robert. "One at a time. Your opportunity for defense, young man, will come in due season."

"The letter, I am convinced, was likewise false," repeated Mr. Avery, with malicious satisfaction. "But first, for the tale this Dan Speedwell brought here some time before the fire. He said he and his brother saw a man lurking about the shops with a mask on, and at night."

"We did!" burst out Billy.

"Wait!" commanded Mr. Robert again.

"I had that matter looked into after the fire. I began to suspect these Speedwells as knowing more about the way the fire was set than they should. Who but they knew of the old drain?"

"And lucky for me that they *did* know of the drain," murmured Mr. Robert.

"You are naturally prejudiced in their favor because of what happened at the fire," said Mr. Avery, loftily.

"I am certainly grateful," admitted Mr. Darringford.

"We will pass that," said the superintendent, with a cold smile, and waving his hand. "We will say that—by some means—these boys learned of the old drain."

"Was it altogether a secret, Avery?" asked Mr. Darringford, who seemed to consider himself counsel for the Speedwells.

"People had forgotten it. I did not know of its existence, although I suppose I must have noticed the gratings in the yard which led into the culvert. One of these gratings, by the way, is just at the step of the back entrance to the bell tower—or what is now the site of the bell tower."

"Well?"

"To anybody who knew about that drain, it would be easy for an entrance to be made into the enclosure of the shops after hours. From the grating one need only to step into the rear door of the building; a stairway to the basement was right at hand; and under that stairway the bomb was exploded that caused the fire."

"We are sure it was a bomb, Mr. Avery?"

"The explosion was heard. The foolish contrivance these boys wrote you about could not cause an explosion."

Mr. Darringford shook his head and waited.

"You know what boys are," said the superin-

tendent, testily. "I do not wish to accuse these Speedwells of the actual setting of the fire—or the placing of the bomb; but they knew all about the drain, and they are evidently determined to try and throw dust in the eyes of the investigators by telling this foolish story about the finding of a rat-trap and an alarm clock in such conjunction that the two strike matches and set oily waste afire!" and Mr. Avery laughed in a most unpleasant way.

"With what object, do you suppose, Mr. Avery?" asked the younger Darrington, quietly.

"To curry favor, of course. You were already foolish enough to reward them in a manner all out of proportion to the favor they did you and I think——"

"Might that not be a matter of opinion?" interposed Mr. Darrington, grimly. "I considered that they saved my life."

"Well!" exclaimed Mr. Avery, angrily. "If you are determined to look upon it in that way——"

"Go on, sir!" commanded Mr. Darrington. "We will pass over my personal reasons for being grateful to these boys."

"Then be just," said Mr. Avery, sharply. "It is decided by the detectives that a bomb caused the fire. This ridiculous story these Speed-

wells tell is directly opposed to the detectives' theory."

"Not altogether," said Dan, interrupting.

"Be still!" commanded Avery.

"Have you any more to add?" asked Mr. Darringford, mildly.

"Not at present. I wish you to be warned. These boys are untrustworthy, and they know more about the starting of the fire than they are willing to tell, I believe!"

Dan spoke again. His eyes flashed, and he looked at the Averys scornfully.

"You may be right, Mr. Avery. Perhaps Billy and I suspect more about the cause of the fire than we have been willing to tell before. But we'll tell it now!"

His brother seized his coat sleeve, and tried to speak, but Dan shook his hand off.

"Wait!" he said. "Let me ask Mr. Avery a few questions."

"On my word!" exclaimed the superintendent, scornfully.

"And why shouldn't he?" asked Mr. Darringford. "You have been broad in your accusations. The boy has a right to defend himself—if he can."

"Ah—yes—if he can!" snapped Mr. Avery.

Billy could barely keep his seat, and only his respect for Mr. Darringford enabled him to hold

his tongue. But Dan had recovered his self-control and now he spoke calmly:

"You say the fire was started by an explosion?"

"We can find a hundred people who heard it, young man."

"Are you sure the fire did not start before the explosion?"

"What do you mean?"

"Suppose there had been a naphtha, or gasoline, tank near the spot where the fire started—the place where Billy found the trap and clock-work arrangement?" suggested Dan, with provoking calm. "The fire might have begun in the waste, caused by the matches, set burning by the trap, the trigger of which was released by the clock. When it spread, it reached the naphtha tank——"

Frank Avery's face was a study. He flushed; he paled; and actually looked frightened!

Mr. Darrington, however, sprang to his feet and clapped his hands together sharply. He was evidently very much excited.

"Wait!" he exclaimed. "I am trying to recall something. What was it about gasoline being in that closet under the stairs in the bell-tower, Avery?"

The superintendent's face was ghastly. His lips moved, but for a moment he could not speak.

His gaze seemed fascinated by his employer's face.

Gradually Robert Darringford's countenance cleared. He sat down again and looked sternly at the superintendent.

"I have it!" he said, and he said it as though it likewise meant; "I have *you*!"

Then the young man pursued the subject: "I remember that we had some discussion about that gasoline, Avery. I found by chance that the lamp man was keeping his supplies in that closet. I pointed out to you that the proceeding was reckless. An accident, and the stairways would be shut off by fire. Luckily when the fire did come there was nobody but myself in the entire building."

"I—I am almost certain, Mr. Robert," stammered Avery, "that the gasoline was removed."

"I'll find that out," said Mr. Darringford. "If not, the rapid spread of the fire is easily explained. If the gasoline was there the fire might have been smouldering some time before there was any explosion. The contrivance Dan and Billy tell us about might easily be the first cause of the burning of our building. The detectives have been at fault. I fear a grave error has been made in the investigation."

"I am sure, Mr. Robert, that you are wrong. The lamp man must have removed the gasoline

immediately on my reproving him," said the superintendent, feebly.

"But did you reprove him?" asked Mr. Darringford, sharply.

"I—I am almost sure——"

"This isn't like your usual confidence, Avery," said young Darringford, sternly. "We will take it up at another time. I wish to know now if you have anything further to say in the presence of these boys?"

"I have had nothing that I wished to say in their presence," snapped Avery. "You will please remember that."

"Then I am to understand that your accusations go no further?"

"It is useless, I see, to say anything against the Speedwell boys to you," declared the superintendent.

"Quite so, unless you can prove your statements. Boys who would risk their lives, as Dan did for a man in peril, are not likely to play tricks for the sake of being noticed."

"Or for the sake of reward," sneered Mr. Avery.

"They seem to make no claim for the thousand dollars we offer. They have brought no accusations," went on Mr. Darringford, tartly. "I am only grateful to them for bringing these matters to my notice."

The Averys, plainly much disappointed, walked out of the room.

"Now, Dan," said Mr. Darringford, "you have something more to tell me?"

"I don't know how you suspect that, sir," said Dan. "But I have."

"It's part of my business to read people's faces. And I have noticed that both you and Billy are swelling with information that you want to get out of your systems! Go ahead," and he laughed for the first time during the interview.

The Speedwells laughed also, but they looked at each other rather sheepishly. Billy nodded to Dan to lead the way, and the older boy did so. He told first, and briefly, of the five tramps they had met in the marsh up by Karnac Lake, of the conversation Dan had overheard, and of the fact that the bearded man had recognized both the brothers. But he left it to Billy to tell what he wished to about the Badgers.

Mr. Darringford listened to it all quietly, and commented upon poor Rick Badger, and his father, most leniently.

"I remember Jimmy Badger," he said. "I know he was turned away; but I supposed it to be for the usual cause—bad habits.

"However, knowing Jimmy as I do, I am sure he would never feel revengeful. And the unfortunate boy cannot be held accountable for any part

he may have had in the fire. What you tell, however, leads me to believe that his contrivance was invented solely for his own pleasure; but that some more sinister person used the invention for a serious purpose.

"We will look up these tramps. Especially the fellow who speaks English. We did have some trouble with foreigners this spring. We hired several Italians for a certain kind of work. There was trouble as soon as they came into the shops. I fear that Mr. Avery hasn't a soothing way with him.

"But our superintendent is a very capable man, and my father has every confidence in him. Enough of that, boys. I believe this information may lead to something of importance. We may catch the real incendiary because of the discoveries of you two. If we do, remember that the Darringford Company never goes back on it's word." The reward offered will belong to you boys."

CHAPTER XXIV

THE MYSTERY EXPLAINED

FOR the following two weeks there was very little talked about among the members of the Riverdale Outing Club—at least, among those members that owned and rode motorcycles—saving the coming races at the baseball park.

At least a dozen manufacturers of power machines had combined to make the affair a success. There were silver cups for almost every event. There were races for every class of riders, including two events for ladies. There were to be some of the greatest professional riders in the country—regular “wizards of the motor wheel”—to show the people of Riverdale and vicinity what could be done on, and with, a motorcycle.

There were several events arranged in which the riders of special machines would compete with each other; that is, the Flying Feathers would race with each other, the Red Rangers would race with each other, the Swallows, the Fox-Duplex, and all the rest. Then, the winners of these heats would have a chance to compete.

It was for the honor of riding the Flying Feather in the races against other makes of motorcycles that the amateur riders would struggle. Eighty riders belonging in Riverdale and vicinity were entered in four races for supremacy. Eight of them were ladies. The distance was in each case two miles.

At the end there would be six mile races between the champions of the different makes of machine, and the different classes of riders. It was naturally the desire of every boy riding a Flying Feather motorcycle in Riverdale to carry the colors of the Darringford Machine Shops into the competitions with the riders of rival wheels.

Billy seemed convinced in his own mind that one or the other of them had a good chance to bear the colors for the Darringford shops in the second class of competitors in which he and Dan were entered. And he came to the very day before the races with just that same cheerful, confident feeling.

It was on this day that an incident occurred—and it happened to Billy—that was of paramount importance to several of the characters of this story. Billy had picked up Rick Badger that morning as he went on his route and the dumb boy had driven Betty (which he delighted to do) while Billy delivered the milk.

Already there were many strangers in River-

dale to attend the races set for the following day. The public square before the Court House presented a lively appearance.

As the drove through this square, Rick proudly guiding the mare in the rather crowded street, he suddenly became startled and confused and nearly drove Betty into another team.

"Hi! what's the matter with you?" demanded Billy, seizing the reins just in time.

Rick was greatly disturbed. He tried to tell Billy he was sorry; but even as he did this in his poor, painful way, he was looking eagerly back at a crowd beside the way, and appeared to be frightened, too.

"What's the matter?" repeated Billy.

Rick managed to tell him, haltingly, that he had seen somebody in the crowd who frightened him.

"Who is it? Who scared you?" demanded Billy.

All Rick would say at first was, that it was a man. He was a bad man. He was a man who had made Rick—at some time in the past—do something that had frightened him. These facts Billy drew forth from the dumb boy with much trouble.

Now, there was no particular reason why Billy should have become suspicious because of Rick Badger's trouble. But he looked up suddenly and saw a man on the sidewalk whose appearance sur-

prised and startled him. The man was a dark, foreign-looking person, and Billy grabbed Rick's arm on the instant and pointed the Italian out.

"Is that the man who scared you?" Billy asked the dumb boy.

The latter shook his head decidedly. As far as Billy could learn the foreign-looking man was nothing like the man whom Rick had seen.

Nevertheless, the appearance of the strange Italian on the streets of Riverdale troubled Billy's mind. He remembered clearly the appearance of the foreigners who had been with the bearded man in the swamp, and this fellow was one of those very persons, Billy was sure.

He drove in behind Mr. Appleyard's store and hitched Betty under the shed. Rick was for going home at once. He lost interest in the town and the crowd very easily. But Billy knew how to attract him back into the public square.

"Come on, Rick," he said, "and I'll stand treat to an ice cream soda."

Billy's own eyes were observant enough as they pressed on toward the pharmacy. Suddenly he caught sight of the foreign man walking with another—a bigger and burlier man. He made sure that Rick saw them, but the dumb boy did not give the two a second glance.

"Perhaps it's because they have their backs to us," thought Billy and he hurried Rick on.

They approached the two strangers. The Italian looked back over his shoulder and Billy made sure that he was one of the tramps he had seen in the swamp.

When the boys were abreast of the two Billy glanced sharply at the bigger man. He was bearded and was an ugly looking character, although well dressed. There was no mistaking him.

Billy saw that Rick was looking the other way. He nudged the dumb boy and brought him forward so that he might see the bearded man.

The instant Rick observed the stranger he started and uttered that dumb cry of fear so painful to hear. The man turned. He saw the mute and it was plain he recognized him.

"Hold on! he shan't hurt you!" cried Billy, holding Rick when the dumb youth attempted to run. "Who is he, Rick?"

The latter was so confused he could not reply intelligibly for the moment. The bearded man then recognized Billy. He uttered an exclamation and turned to escape himself. His foreign friend had already slipped off into the crowd.

"No you don't!" cried Billy. "I've got you now!"

He seized the man by the sleeve, and hung to Rick with his other hand.

"Is this the man who got the trap and the

clock works from you? You know, Rick! The invention you had to make a fire?"

Rick nodded energetically. "This is the man, then!" went on Billy. "What did he give you for it?"

Rick signed quickly with one hand, and spelled this sentence:

"He stole it from me!"

At that moment the man, recovering in a measure from his surprise, jerked away from Billy and started across the square.

"Stop him! Stop him!" cried young Speedwell, and darting after he leaped forward into the air and landed—hands and knees—upon the bearded man's back!

The force of the blow carried the fellow to the ground. Before he could rise two strangers had pounced on him and held him down.

"That's all right, sonny," said one of these strangers, snapping shining handcuffs upon the wrists of the struggling one. "We've had our eyes on this fellow, and I reckon you and the other lad have identified him for us. It's all right, I tell you! Mr. Darringford will tell you all about it later."

The crowd that gathered pushed Billy back then. The two policemen in plain clothes hurried the bearded man away toward the Court House. Rick was nowhere to be seen, but when Billy got

away from the crowd he found his dumb friend waiting for him in front of Sander's pharmacy.

The rough man once out of sight, Rick's alarm vanished. He had not forgotten the promise of the ice cream soda. So Billy gave it to him and, when they went back to get the horse, and on the way home, Billy got all the information from Rick that he could regarding the man who had frightened him.

Some things that the dumb youth tried to convey to his friend were rather obscure. But nearly all Billy could understand. He knew already, for instance, that the Badgers had lived in one of the machine shop tenements even after Jimmy Badger had been discharged by Frank Avery.

Behind the tenements, as behind the shops themselves, was the waste ground and the deep gully where Dan and Billy had found the opening of the old drain. One day Rick had carried his rat-trap and clock work invention out into the fields. This strange man had found him there, had observed how the apparatus worked, and had deliberately taken the box away from the dumb boy.

As near as Billy could find out, when Rick tried to follow him, crying for his toy, the man had beaten him with his fists. Therefore Rick had come to fear the man.

That evening Billy Speedwell had an opportunity to repeat this explanation to Robert Darrington, who motored out to the Speedwell house particularly to see the boys.

"I guess we can consider the Badgers' connection with the fire as satisfactorily cleared up," remarked young Mr. Darrington. "At least, I am inclined with you boys to release poor Rick from all responsibility. And I have already sent word to Jimmy himself that he can have his old place back. I have spoken to Mr. Avery about him. It was a mistake to discharge the man. Besides, I have talked with Mrs. Badger, and Rick shall have the run of the shops again. He is a harmless boy and through his interest in mechanics he may be helped," concluded Mr. Darrington.

"Now, enough of that. The Badgers are not to blame for our fire; but we have got the man who is. And, behind him, are the Italians whom we were forced to discharge. The fellow whom you helped capture to-day, Billy, and whom the detectives had been watching for some time, was really the man who did the deed. He placed Rick's contrivance under the stairs of the bell-tower. He set the fire. A careless arrangement of our own," added Mr. Darrington, "regarding the storing of gasoline caused the conflagration to spread with such rapidity.

"Now Dan, and Billy, I want to tell you a very pleasant thing in advance of your learning it officially," said the young gentleman, smiling. "You have both been instrumental in discovering the person who set our plant afire. Without your assistance we might never have caught the fellows. He, too, is an old discharged employe—a man with a grudge. According to the terms of our offer, you have won the reward——"

"Oh!" ejaculated Dan.

"A thousand dollars!" burst out Billy, and he had to get up and spin around on his heel—he could not help it, he said.

"Exactly. Don't spend it all for peppermint candy," advised Mr. Darringford, dryly. "You have certainly earned the reward. It will be paid over to you in good time by our lawyers. Meanwhile, there is one other reward I expect one of you boys to earn to-morrow," and he rose to go.

"You know what that is," he added, seeing their sparkling eyes and flushed faces. "I expect one of the Speedwells to win out with the Flying Feather in the second class races to-morrow. Remember, I shall be deeply disappointed if one of you at least does not carry the Darringford colors to victory and win the cup."

"Hurrray!" cried Dan, thumping Billy on the back.

CHAPTER XXV

THE DAY OF THE RACE

THE capture of the man who had crept through the old drain and put in place the contrivance that set the machine shops afire was known to but few people in Riverdale the next morning—and interested only a few. The news that the reward of a thousand dollars would be paid to Dan and Billy Speedwell was likewise suppressed for the time.

In fact, Riverdale folk, both old and young, had very little interest in anything on that particular day, except the races at the baseball park. Visitors came by train and by boat, and others came into town by every kind of rig that was to be found on the farms around about.

The first two-mile heats were soon run off. They left (of the Flying Feather Riders, and of the second class) Chance, Stetson, Dan and Billy to compete to see who should ride in the races against the other makes of motorcycles.

Several trials between the champions riding the other machines were run off first. The ladies' race was run, too, and Lettie Parker bore off the

prize for girls of her age. Billy grew hoarse cheering Lettie around the track.

After the Red Rangers had run out their heat and a Compton man had won the title of champion of that make, it came the turn of the Flying Feathers. The four boys—all members of the local outing club—came to the scratch. Chance was cheered heartily by the crowd. He was known to be the brother of the superintendent of the Darringford shops, and every man in the factory had been given a half holiday, and was there with his family to “root” for the colors.

When Dan and Billy got to the starting point side by side, however, Biff Hardy leaped from his seat and started a yell that spurred the Riverdale Club to its best exertions.

“Dan! Dan! That’s the man!
Dan! Dan! Dan Speedwell!”

Before any of Avery’s friends could raise a second cry for him the four boys were at the scratch. The starter almost instantly sent them off. The exhausts began to pop and the four motorcycles leaped ahead.

Jim Stetson was a good rider; but he was out of this race from the start! It was just Chance and the Speedwells. The three strung out im-

mediately, Billy pushing the leader surprisingly close, with Dan a length behind.

For the first lap there was no change in the riders, save that Jim Stetson fell farther and farther behind. Of course Chance had taken the inner rail, Billy was sticking to him like wax, and Dan was coming along with ease in his brother's wake.

But it was plain that Billy was pushing Avery and making him work. Chance showed his nervousness by glancing around, not only once, but twice, to see if he was shaking Billy off.

Avery grew desperate. He let his machine out. He put on all his power and tried to coax his motorcycle from Billy's vicinity. It was a big spurt, but it came too early in the race. Too late Chance realized that he had been forced!

The Speedwells had again displayed an example of their wonderful teamwork. Billy had no idea of winning that race. Indeed, he knew that he could not keep up the pace he had set when he pressed Chance from the rear.

Nor could the latter keep it up. His machine wobbled when he left Billy behind. He seemed to be losing ground. Was that Billy Speedwell again at his saddle?

The rival rider continued to pull ahead. The crowd was yelling now to good purpose. And

suddenly Chance realized that Biff Hardy's chant was taking precedence again over every other sound.

"Dan! Dan! He's the man!"

It was Dan Speedwell beside him—and they were already on the last lap!

Chance would have done anything—given anything almost—to win. But it was not to be. Dan pulled farther and farther ahead. Before they got into the stretch Speedwell had passed him completely and had taken the rail.

After that Chance Avery had to content himself to tag in, a bad second. Dan was the champion of the Flying Feather riders and had the honor of riding against the champions of the other machines in the six mile event.

It had been a good race, if a quick one. The few entries had seemed to make it pass all the more quickly. And Dan bore away a very handsome cup as his prize.

He shook Billy's hand warmly as they went to the place where the riders were assembled.

"You're a great old chum, Billy-boy!" he said. "That was a sacrifice play all right. If you hadn't forced Chance's hand I doubt if I'd have won at all."

"You were bound to win, Dannie," declared the younger boy, proudly. "And now you're

going to win the second class race for all amateurs."

There were several events before the final race for second class amateurs came on, so Dan had time to rest. He felt as fresh as possible when he trundled his cycle down to the starting place for that six-mile event.

The Darringford crowd, as well as the Riverdale Club, cheered him now. He was there to win for the local shops, and all hands "rooted" for him grandly. He saw Mr. Robert and the old gentleman in their box waving their handkerchiefs to him. Both the Averys had disappeared.

The pistol was fired and the young aspirants for fame were off in a bunch. For the first of the twelve laps the leader was not five lengths ahead of the last man. It was a grilling race from the first. There was little holding back. Every rider was desirous of making a record for his machine.

Dan Speedwell was one of the first three. He kept in that position for several laps. Then suddenly the Red Ranger champion went by him in a flash, and Dan found himself in place number four!

The Red Ranger and the Fox-Duplex had a pretty fight for place right ahead of the steady going Dan. The seventh lap was before them.

The result of the spurt of the Red Ranger rider was that before the end of the eighth lap, both he and the Fox-Duplex man dropped behind. Dan had taken their places. There were only two in the lead of him then.

But the first motorcycle was half a lap ahead of Dan Speedwell. He realized that the advantage was great—it seemed impossible that he should overtake that rider. The second man he passed at the end of the ninth lap.

The dust on the track by this time was a smothering cloud. Dan could scarcely see the fellow so far ahead. But he knew he was there and if he, Dan Speedwell, was to carry the colors of the Darringford shops to victory, it behooved him to be up and doing!

“Dan! Dan! You’re the man!”

He couldn’t disappoint them all! And Mr. Robert! The Flying Feather ought to win this race. It was the best machine in the race, Dan was positive. And, if that was so, *then the Flying Feather should win!*

The determination inspired him. He let his machine out to the last notch, and began then and there a spurt that was really the sensation of the races. In a cloud of dust that whirled about him like a winding sheet, the young cyclist shot along the track, gaining on the rider ahead with such rapidity that the spectators rose to their feet in pure excitement to watch his work.

The chant died down. The cheering ceased. The spectators were too greatly thrilled by the exhibition to applaud in the usual way.

The Flying Feather and its young rider overhauled the leading machine at the beginning of the eleventh lap. The leader tried to spurt, too; but Dan had the pace then. He crept up on the other, past rear wheel, past saddle, past forward wheel until he was fairly ahead of his rival.

He was coming home, and the crowd could see daylight between Dan's machine and the other. A roar burst from their throats. The roof of the grandstand seemed to rock.

Down the stretch young Speedwell flew, out of the smothering dust now and with the end in sight.

Those final seconds seemed as long as minutes. Dan was aware of the faces of his cheering friends in the stand—he recognized his father and mother—the children—Billy—Mildred Kent and the girls—even Biff Hardy and his crowd of yelling, excited fellows!

They were all cheering him. He was making good. In his box Robert Darringford was standing upright and waving a big flag. The Riverdale Club, almost to a member, was yelling for Dan Speedwell. The Riverdale people as a whole took up the chant.

And, as Dan flashed over the line, the great assembly, carried away by the excitement of the sport and the plucky fight of the winner, forgot

jealousies and rivalries, and rose to the winner:

“Dan! Dan! He’s the man!
Dan! Dan! Dan Speedwell!”

And, could we find a better time to say “good-by” to the Speedwell boys and their friends? Dan and Billy have shown us what pluck and endurance can do, and that sport is only good sport when it is seasoned with good temper and fairness.

If Dan and Billy have won the reader’s approval, their further adventures can be followed in the next volume of this series, entitled, “The Speedwell Boys and Their Racing Auto; Or, A Run for the Golden Cup,” giving the particulars of a great bank mystery and an endurance run long to be remembered.

“It was grand, Dan!” cried Billy, after it was all over. “Just grand!”

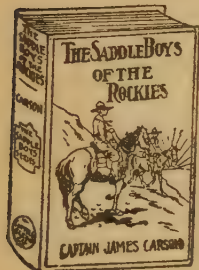
Dan smiled grimly. But that smile meant a great deal.

THE END

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